

THE ROLE OF EMPLOYEES IN DECISION-MAKING AND STRATEGY WORK

A multi-case study of participation in Finnish industrial production
companies

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Abstract

New organizational structures where employees have equal decision-making power have been introduced and the overall atmosphere in business has been shifting towards more inclusive organizations. It has been claimed that flat and democratic organizations represent the new generation of organizations in general. Also, in Finland the role and power to influence employees rise a lot of debate in the field of business and mass media at the moment. Giving power to the employees is seen as a tool to create commitment and agile ways to serve the customer. Finnish working life and companies are very inclusive compared to other parts of the world. We have a long history in involving employees via employee representatives, but there are also many young companies that see the role of employees in a completely new way. However, the majority of companies in Finland have a long history and can be perceived as traditional. What role employees currently have in these companies when it comes to decision-making?

This thesis work is to study the role employees have in strategy work and strategic decision-making in organizations that are perceived traditional. In this qualitative multi-case research, the research data was collected through semi-structured interviews with altogether 32 employees from three different-sized industrial production companies. The interviewees represent different levels of the organization from the production employees to top management. Data analysis was conducted as an iterative and explorative process, where data was transcribed, categorized and synthesized. Finally, the research findings were discussed with existing literature in order to improve the finding's validity.

According to the study findings, participation in strategy is seen very differently compared to participation in decision-making. There were also big differences between the different employee groups represented. The production employees (blue-collars) were largely satisfied with the possibilities to influence achieved by the use of Lean-methods and employee representatives. On the contrary, the middle management and white-collars often felt that they were lacking similar possibilities to participate in decision-making. In all three organizations, the strategy process was mostly perceived as a traditional top-down one. The white-collar employees and middle managers would like to participate more in strategy-making. However, the blue-collar employees often did not see the point in participating more. Also, the study shows how individual team leaders can create very inclusive and agile teams despite the overall bureaucracy and hierarchy that were evident in all of the three organizations.

Keywords strategy as practice, strategy, participation, employee involvement, decision-making, decision-making processes

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Tiivistelmä

Uudet organisoitumistavat, joissa yrityksen työntekijöillä on tasa-arvoinen mahdollisuus vaikuttaa työyhteisön ja koko yrityksen asioihin ovat tulleet tunnetuiksi eri puolilla bisnesmaailmaa. Väitetään, että yritykset, jotka toimivat tällä tavalla, edustavat organisaatioiden ja organisoitumistapojen uutta sukupolvea. Henkilöstön päätöksentekovallan lisääminen nähdään tapana sitouttaa sekä luoda ketteryyttä ja joustavuutta asiakkaiden palvelemiseksi. Suomalainen työelämä ja yritykset ovat jo pitkään osallistaneet henkilöstöä paremmin kuin maailmassa keskimäärin, esimerkiksi luottamushenkilöjärjestelmän kautta. Uudet suomalaiset yritykset myös ovat luoneet täysin uusia tapoja jakaa valtaa ja vastuuta. Suomessa on kuitenkin olemassa lukuisa joukko yrityksiä, jotka toimivat hyvin perinteiseen, hierarkkiseen järjestelmään luottaen. Mikä on henkilöstön rooli tänä päivänä näissä yrityksissä? Ovatko ne mukana osallistumisen eturintamassa vai kiinni historian toistamisessa?

Tämän pro gradu -työn tähtäimessä on ollut tutkia henkilöstön roolia strategiatyössä ja strategisessa päätöksenteossa perinteisissä suomalaisissa teollista tuotantoa harjoittavissa yrityksissä. Tutkimuksen empiirisessä osuudessa haastateltiin yhteensä 32 eri tasolla työskentelevää työntekijää aina tehtaan tuotantohenkilöstöstä ylimpään johtoon. Analyysi toteutettiin iteratiivisesti ja eksploratiivisesti aineistoa luokittelemalla ja yhteen vetämällä. Lopuksi tutkimustuloksia peilattiin olemassaolevaan tutkimukseen niiden paikkaansapitävyyden vahvistamiseksi.

Tutkimuksella on useita löydöksiä, jotka tukevat aiheeseen liittyvää muuta tutkimusta. Tutkimuksen mukaan tavat osallistua eroavat suuresti strategian ja yleisen päätöksenteon välillä. Lisäksi eri työntekijäryhmien välillä oli isoja eroja osallistumismahdollisuuksiin ja -haluihin liittyen. Tuotantohenkilöstö koki usein saavansa äänensä kuuluviin riittävästi mm. tehtaiden lean-menetelmien avulla, eivätkä toivo enempää vaikutusvaltaa yrityksen asioihin. Moni heistä ei koe, että se olisi heidän tehtävänsä. Valkokaulustyöläiset sekä keskijohto sen sijaan saattavat kokea tulevansa sivuutetuiksi monissa päätösasioissa, jotka kuitenkin vaikuttavat heidän työhönsä. Nämä henkilöstöryhmät myös haluaisivat osallistua yritysten strategiseen päätöksentekoon vielä enemmän. Tutkimuksessa selvisi myös, että näissä monesti perinteisiksi ja hierarkkiseksi koetuissa työyhteisöissä yksittäisellä johtajalla on mahdollisuus luoda hyvinkin osallistava kulttuuri omien alaistensa kesken – jos hän on valmis luopumaan kontrollista.

Tutkimus tuo lisää tietoa erilaisista osallistumisen tavoista erityisesti henkilöstön näkökulmasta strategisen johtamisen tutkimuskentälle. Työn akateemisena viitekehyksenä toimii erityisesti strategia käytänteinä -suuntaus, ja sen osallistumiseen keskittynyt painotus.

Avainsanat strategia, henkilöstö, osallistaminen, osallistuminen, strategia käytänteinä, päätöksenteko, päätöksentekoprosessit

Foreword

This Master's thesis was written as a commission by a company called Boardman Ltd. The company is a non-profit network that aims to develop board work and ownership competences in Finland. Boardman's main activities for its network are competence forum events, where participants can contribute to discussions around a topic of their interest. (Boardman, 2017)

Boardman's goal is to bring new research data and insight to these competence forums in addition to the practical knowledge provided by the members. One of the topics for the competence forum events of 2018 is the participation of employees in the companies' strategic decision-making and management. This competence forum has been recently founded and there is a clear need for insight within the topic's area of research. That is why Boardman approached Aalto in search for a master's thesis worker, who would be interested in the topic.

The members see that engaging employees in a company's decision-making is a key success factor in all kinds of companies. The company needs to have clear goals, continuous dialogue and shared information regarding the situation the company is in order to make it possible for employees to participate in decision-making. The members of the competence forum also see that management style and the role of employees differ according to the age and size of the company – do control and the level of hierarchy grow as well? This approach is a modern collaborative approach to corporate governance, where the role of the board is to advise instead of monitoring as an outsider. (Sundaramurthy & Lewis, 2003)

This thesis is born from the will to better understand the current state and level of participation and involvement in traditional and typical Finnish companies. Hence, these three case companies with a long history and industrial production located in Finland were selected. In Boardman it is seen that when all members of the organization participate in decision-making, the entire company benefits from it. Is this the case in these typical and traditional Finnish companies in 2018? This is the first thesis written about this topic for the development group and hopefully results in more research around the topic in the future.

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1 Introduction

The way we make decisions in the working place is under a big change at the moment. Many companies have invented new ways to include the entire staff in formulating the purpose the companies are fulfilling and the strategies to get there (Laloux, 2015). Teams without managers, flat organizations and value-driven companies where each individual has an equal right to influence are here to stay. These new practices have changed the roles of both managers and individual organizational members and have a possibility to change the entire way we do business. New generations are expecting more flexibility, and this causes pressure to create new practices also in companies that haven't been forerunners in this change (Deloitte, 2017). In order to meet the changing market landscape, companies in general need to be more democratic (Cunha, Rego, & Clegg, 2011).

In management literature, however, managers are traditionally the ones who wield power in companies (Elbanna & Child, 2007; Laine & Vaara, 2015; Mantere & Vaara, 2008; Mintzberg, Raisinghani, & Theoret, 1976) and strategic decision-making is seen as a central job in the work of managers. Other organizational members have the role of implementing the top management's ideas (Laine & Vaara, 2015). At the same time a large number of companies struggle in implementing their strategies (Mankins & Steele, 2005). Practices that support participation offer a solution for implementation problems and lack of employee empowerment (Goldstein, 1981; Hutter, Nketia, & Füller, 2017). Participation to strategy processes is studied to influence the employee's commitment to strategy via sensemaking and higher individual empowerment (Hutter et al., 2017). In other words, involving employees to different decision-making processes would benefit the entire company (Thakur, 1998).

As many of the companies that are known in the public for their new ways of organizing and democratic roles in decision-making are ICT-companies, there is a common misconception that these practices would be possible in such companies only. Participatory methods and practices are, on the contrary, used and studied in multiple different companies: for instance libraries (Oosthuizen & Du Toit, 1999; Strong & Kennedy, 2016), companies that operate in pharmaceuticals and food manufacturing (Mack & Szulanski, 2017) and hospitals (Jackson, 1983). Many international corporations are including a wide range of organizational members to their strategy building via Open Strategy methods (Mack & Szulanski, 2017; Tavakoli, Schlagwein, & Schoder, 2017). These examples show

that participatory methods or inclusion are not something only small or mid-sized, agile ICT-companies could do.

Even though participation and increasing openness result in significant prosperity, the change an organization might need to go through can cause dilemmas (Hautz, Seidl, & Whittington, 2017). Changing an organization's culture and the strategy process from hierarchical to distributed can be difficult, as a communal approach is easier in smaller divisions. It also needs understanding and capabilities from managers, as their role could be challenged during the process of change. (Cunha et al., 2011)

Even though there are multiple companies using practices that support participation in strategy making and decision-making in general, there are still a lot of companies that do business with a very traditional organizational structure and roles in strategic decision-making. Many of them have seen that there is a need to become less bureaucratic and more forward-looking (Hamel & Zanini, 2018), but not all. This thesis was born from the interest towards understanding the role of employees in these traditional companies in Finland today.

In Finnish work culture, employees have more possibilities to influence decision-making processes compared to many other countries in general (Eurofund, 2013). The strong labor unions and legislation have also supported the fact that the employees should get their voices heard via employee representatives or shop stewards. All of this, in my opinion, creates a good ground for adopting new ways of being more democratic here in Finland. This is why studying these companies that are perceived traditional is so interesting. Are they, really, as traditional as the first impression would suggest? Or are there new practices that support participation to decision-making, also on the strategy-level?

In this study I am interested in the actors in the processes of the case companies' strategic decision-making. The theoretical framework for the thesis is in the research area of *strategy as practice*, which is focused on studying the social activities, practices and processes forming the strategy and the way of strategizing of an organization (Golsorkhi, Rouleau, Seidl, & Vaara, 2014). Focus on the macro-level of activities gives valuable knowledge for practitioners how to support the desired actions in day-to-day working life (Balogun, Jacobs, Jarzabkowski, Mantere, & Vaara, 2014; Johnson, Melin, & Whittington, 2003; Vaara & Whittington, 2012). In the strategy as practice approach, strategy is created in a continuous process (Jarzabkowski, Paul Spee, & Smets, 2013).

The topic of participation in strategy work has also academic relevance, as it has gotten quite little attention in strategy research - especially in terms of participation of others than the top managers. (Laine & Vaara, 2015). My master's thesis articulates the current state of the research within this topic, but also gives empirical knowledge regarding participation in strategy work and strategic decision-making processes.

1.1 Research objectives and questions

In this thesis I will study strategic decision-making processes and the role that different organization members, especially others than the top management have in them. My aim is to understand what kinds of practices the case companies have and how they could link to the role that different employee groups have as decision-makers. The theoretical framework for this study is the sub research area of strategic management research, *strategy as practice* and especially *participation* as the main focus point.

Through this thesis work, I also aim to articulate the latest research within the topics of *strategy as practice* and *participation* – also from academic research fields outside strategic management – and mirror the findings with the insight and data from the case companies.

My aim is to dig into the subject of how employees participate in decision-making processes in different organizations. First, I will approach the topic through a literature review and form an understanding on how the academia sees the role of different organizational members in strategic management, and how participation as a phenomenon is perceived in the context of strategic management research but also other fields of academic research. The research problem in this thesis is:

What is the role of employees in strategic decision-making?

In a more specific level, this study focuses in different practices related to decision-making and the practice of strategy. In the empirical part of my study, I will research the following questions:

RQ1: What is the role of employees in Finnish industrial production companies related to participation in decision-making?

RQ2: What is the role of employees in Finnish industrial production companies related to participation in strategy work?

The first question aims to give a better understanding on the state of the roles of different employee groups in the company in general. The second research question involves strategy work and aims at discovering what kinds of strategy processes these companies have and how strategy-making is seen. The study pre-assumes that there might be differences in practices and how individuals see their role and participate in decision-making in the company in general and in the company's strategy work.

1.2 Structure of the thesis

This thesis work consists of six chapters altogether. After the introduction, I will continue my thesis with a literature review, where I will go through the most relevant academic literature related to this subject. Furthermore, I discuss *participation* in the context of *strategy as practice*, but also look at other approaches to the topic. The findings of the literature review are summarized in the end of the chapter. On the basis of the findings, a theoretical framework is presented. The theoretical framework provides a comprehensive overview of possible and potential practices related to participation in decision-making but also in strategy work.

Then I will present my research setting, the selected research methods and the data. In this third chapter I will also introduce the case companies and reflect on the limitations of this study and evaluate the research. The fourth chapter is where I introduce the findings of the study by presenting a syllabus of each of the three case companies. There, I will first give an outlook to the company characteristics, secondly present the findings related to the strategic decision-making and lastly present the strategy work setting of each of the companies.

In the fifth chapter I will discuss my findings in relation to the academic literature regarding *strategy as practice* and *participation*. There I will also provide a supplemented version of the theoretical framework. In the sixth and final chapter I will conclude the study with my research summary, managerial implications, and suggestions for further research.

1.3 Definitions

1.3.1 Key terms in this study

Strategy

Strategy can be defined as a “stream of decisions” an organization makes in the long term (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985). A strategy can also be seen as a statement of intent, but also a process how the intent is formulated and performed by the organizational members (Baptista, Wilson, Galliers, & Bynghall, 2017)

Strategy work

Strategy work or “strategizing” is the application or use of strategy,.

Practices

Practices, in this study, refer to the different procedures, tools and norms of strategy work, The term is closely linked with praxis, the activity that is involved in strategy-making, and practitioners, the ones involved in strategy-making or pursuing to influence it (Vaara & Whittington, 2012).

Strategy as practice (SAP)

Strategy as practice it focuses on what happens during the strategy formulation, planning, implementation and other activities related to thinking and making of strategy – when the traditional strategy research is more interested in the links between strategy and the organization’s performance. (Golsorkhi et al., 2014)

Participation

In the context of SAP and in this study, participation refers to the different ways in which practitioners take part or are involved in strategy work decision-making.

1.3.2 The different employee groups represented in this study

In this research, employee groups are divided into four categories based on their work tasks and position in the company: blue-collar employees, white-collar employees, middle managers and top managers. The four groups are introduced next in this chapter.

Factory workers (*blue-collars*)

“Refers to employees whose job entails (largely or entirely) physical labor, such as in a factory or workshop. For a piece of work to be termed blue collar, it should be directly related to the output generated by the firm, and its end result should be identifiable or tangible.” (Businessdictionary.com, 2018)

In this study the blue-collar workers include also occupational safety and health employees and full-time union representatives that work in the factory.

Shop steward

“Appointed or elected union officer who represents fellow workers in discussions with management. He or she also tries to identify and resolve work-related problems in their early stages. Also called steward.” (Businessdictionary.com)

Lower management (*blue-collar team leaders*)

“The organizational tier for supervisors positioned directly above non-managerial employees. Lower management in a business oversees the performance of employees working on line tasks in managerial positions such as foreman, line boss, shift boss, section chief, head nurse or sergeant. Also called supervisory personnel or first level managers.” (Businessdictionary.com, 2018)

In this study the group consists of team leaders responsible for one group of workers in the factory who are for example responsible for planning the working shifts.

Administrative workers (*white-collars*)

“Refers to employees whose job entails, largely or entirely, mental or clerical work, such as in an office. The term white collar work used to characterize non-manual workers, but now it refers to employees or professionals whose work is knowledge intensive, non-routine, and unstructured.” (Businessdictionary.com, 2018)

In this study the white-collar workers are from functions: human resources management, communications, design, sales,

Middle management

“Comprises of managers who head specific departments (such as accounting, marketing, production) or business units, or who serve as project managers in flat organizations. Middle managers are responsible for implementing the top management's policies and plans and typically have two management levels below them. Usually among the first to be slashed in the 'resizing' of a firm, middle management constitutes the thickest layer of managers in a traditional (tall pyramid shaped) organization.” (Businessdictionary.com, 2018)

In this study the group consists of managers and directors who have subordinates and their superior is a member of the company management team or below that.

Top management

“The highest-ranking executives (with titles such as chairman/chairwoman, chief executive officer, managing director, president, executive directors, executive vice-presidents, etc.) responsible for the entire enterprise. Top management translates the policy (formulated by the board-of-directors) into goals, objectives, and strategies, and projects a shared-vision of the future. It makes decisions that affect everyone in the organization and is held entirely responsible for the success or failure of the enterprise.” (Businessdictionary.com, 2018)

In this study the group consists of members of the management team of the case company.

The division differs from the Finnish system, where employees are divided into three groups: *työntekijät*, *toimihenkilöt* and *ylemmät toimihenkilöt*. This division was not used, as the term *toimihenkilöt* consists of both team leaders in factory surroundings (*blue-collar team leaders*) and office task workers in administration (*white-collars*). In this study I wanted to analyze the employees working in factory surroundings and the administrative workers in order to see if the employee groups have different roles due to their different work environments and the nature of their work.

2 Literature review

The theoretical framework for this thesis is strategic management research area *strategy as practice* and especially *participation* as a sub approach under that theme. In this literature review my aim is to discover (1) how the academia sees the role of employees in strategic decision-making, (2) discuss the roots of the *strategy as practice* research approach, (3) what are the key aspects of strategic management in terms of academic research and (4) what is the role of different organization members in them.

First, I will discuss different perspectives to strategic management and the different approaches to the concept of strategy. Following that, the role of employees in strategic decision-making is discussed and followed by the introduction of *strategy as practice* approach. I will conclude the literature review with introducing the topic of *participation* in in *strategy as practice* research approach, but also discuss other research related to the topic from the fields of Human Resources Management and Corporate Governance research.

2.1 Perspectives on strategic management

“What is a strategy?” and “where strategy comes from?” are two questions that are directly linked with each other. In the history, there have been multiple different approaches to strategic management in the academia. For a long time, the term strategy was seen only as something the leader plans the organization would do in the future.

One of the most classical approaches to understand the different meanings of the term is the typology created by Mintzberg & Waters (1985) where intended, unrealized, deliberate,

emergent and realized strategies are presented

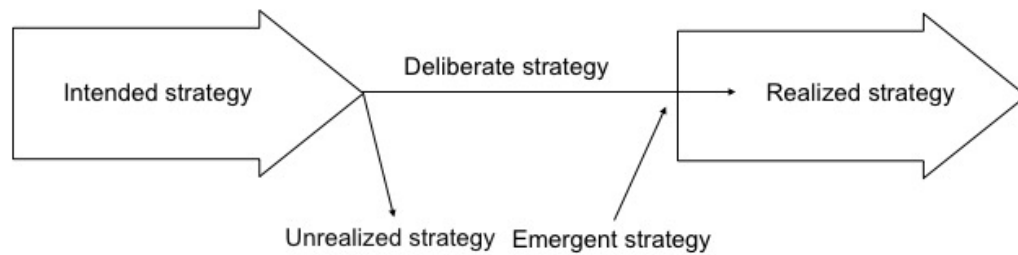


Figure 1 Types of strategies (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985)

Strategies can be argued existing in two forms: as deliberate and emerging. A perfectly deliberate strategy is one which is realized exactly as intended. That means first and foremost that there needs to be a clear direction for the organization without any doubts about it. Secondly, the intention needs to be shared and acknowledged by everyone in the organization. Thirdly, no external force has affected the actions intended, and everything has been done exactly as planned. (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985)

A perfectly emergent strategy, on the contrary needs to have a perfect lack of intention in the long term. The environment forces the organization to act in different ways without any bigger, internal direction. According to Mintzberg & Waters (1985) these two opposites form a continuum of different strategies: the planned strategy, the entrepreneurial strategy, the ideological strategy, the umbrella strategy, the process strategy, the unconnected strategies, the consensus strategy and the imposed strategies. (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985)

Decisions can be defined as “specific commitments to action”, usually regarding resources. “Strategic” is the same as significant, in terms of resources, actions taken or precedents set. (Mintzberg et al., 1976) According to Velu & Stiles (2013), strategic decisions are decisions that managers make in order to commit resources or to set antecedent and even company level actions that contain significance. The decisions are often made in management teams or with a group of board men, which can at their best outperform individual decision makers and voting schemes. The success, however, requires managing the asymmetries in information distribution that causes false assumptions and restricts the effectiveness of the decisions made. (Brodbeck, Kerschreiter, Mojzisch, & Schulz-Hardt, 2007) To sum it up, strategic decisions are commitments to act or use resources in a significant matter. Strategy-making can be described as a process where important decisions are made to form strategies. (Mintzberg, 1973)

Until 1992 there was not much integration between the different streams of literature among the field of strategic management (Hart, 1992). To change the status quo, Hart (1992) created an integrated framework that combines the different roles different players of the organization have in the different strategic management research approaches. The models are not mutually exclusive. Instead, Hart (1992) sees that in practice the models can be combined into distinct strategy-making processes.

Descriptors	Command	Symbolic	Rational	Transactive	Generative
Style	(Imperial) Strategy driven by leader or small top team	(Cultural) Strategy driven by mission and a vision of the future	(Analytical) Strategy driven by formal structure and planning systems	(Procedural) Strategy driven by internal process and mutual adjustment	(Organic) Strategy driven by organizational actors' initiative
Role of Top Management	(Commander) Provide direction	(Coach) Motivate and inspire	(Boss) Evaluate and control	(Facilitator) Empower and enable	(Sponsor) Endorse and support
Role of Organizational Members	(Soldier) Obey orders	(Player) Respond to challenge	(Subordinate) Follow the system	(Participant) Learn and improve	(Entrepreneur) Experiment and take risks

Table 1 An Integrative Framework for Strategy-Making Processes (Hart, 1992)

In management literature, managers are traditionally the ones who use the power in companies (Elbanna & Child, 2007; Laine & Vaara, 2015; Mantere & Vaara, 2008; Mintzberg et al., 1976). Strategic decision-making process (SDMP) is often seen as a

central activity in the work of managers. It is seen as the manager's role to face the complex situations by making big decisions.

In a recent study 92 current CEO's, founders and senior executives were asked about their approaches regarding strategic decision-making. Based on the interviews, the authors were able to create four typologies on how decisions were made. The two key variables were the level of process when it came to strategic decision-making decisions and the level of input gotten from employees to the decisions. These variables created four types of approaches to strategic decision-making. (Teti, Yang, Bloom, & Rivkin, 2017)

High Input	Ad hoc	Collaborative
	Unilateral	Administrative
Low Input	Low Process	High Process

Table 2 Strategic decision-making approaches (Teti et al., 2017)

Teti et al (2017) describe the four typologies as follows. *Ad hoc* organizations do not have a recurring process the decision makers would follow when it comes to decision-making situations. Instead, when a need for a decision appears, the people needed are gathered together, and the decision is made. This system is free from rigid rules but has the risk of excluding disagreeing stakeholders and causing the organization to shift towards the *unilateral* typology. In *collaborative* organizations the leaders can easily say, which employees are involved and in which decisions, as there are processes at place and the employees are seen bringing value to the decision-making. A downside of the system is that the companies might use too much time achieving consensus with irrelevant parties in order to create engagement. (Teti et al., 2017)

The academia has studied the roles of different functions in strategic decision-making (Miller, Hickson, & Wilson, 2008). Also the role of middle management has been a field of interest (Velu & Stiles, 2013). Yet, the roles of other organizational members have had only little interest in the topic of strategic management research (Laine & Vaara, 2015).

2.2 Strategy as practice

“Strategy as practice research focuses on the micro-level social activities, processes and practices that characterize organizational strategy and strategizing.” (Golsorkhi et al., 2014, p. 1)

Strategy as practice (SAP) research approach has its roots in a broader interest in practices in social sciences, but moreover in studies of strategy in different contexts (Golsorkhi et al., 2014; Vaara & Whittington, 2012). Following Whittington (1996) and other significant, early publications (Hendry, 2000; Jarzabkowski & Wilson, 2002; Knights & Morgan, 1991; Oakes, Townley, & Cooper, 1998) SAP started building a distinct identity in the early 2000s (Vaara & Whittington, 2012).

The roots of *strategy as practice* are in the concept of strategy work, which was one of the leading research agendas in strategic management research but was later overshadowed by approaches that linked more with micro-economics and statistical analytics. (Golsorkhi et al., 2014) One of the key authors studying strategy-making and the different approaches was Henry Mintzberg, who published multiple papers regarding the issue (Mintzberg, 1973; Mintzberg & McHugh, 1985; Mintzberg et al., 1976) before the concept of *strategy as practice* was born.

One of the early theoretical influencers of SAP was an article by Whittington (1996) ‘Strategy as practice’ (Vaara & Whittington, 2012). In this article, he is able to point out an emerging approach to strategy, where the outlook is in strategy as a social ‘practice’ – what kind of interactions and actions are present in strategizing. (Whittington, 1996) According to Whittington (1996) there has been four basic perspectives to strategy in academic research and also in common business practice. The four approaches are Policy, Planning, Process and Practice. They differ from each other when it comes to the target level and the dominant concerns they entail. At the other end of the vertical axis is the outlook where the interest is in where the strategy is going to – and at the other end the focus is on how the organization is getting there. The horizontal axis divides the perspectives between the ones in which organizational units are seen as whole, and to those where the focus is on individuals involved in strategy-making. (Whittington, 1996)

Levels

		Organizations	Managers
Issue	Where	Policy	Planning
	How	Process	Practice

Table 3 The four basic perspectives to strategy (Whittington, 1996)

In this division, Whittington (1996) describes *strategy as practice* approach as something that “shifts the concern from the core competence of the corporation to the practical competence of the manager as strategist.” Thus the focus is managerial, as in the planning perspective, but the issue is all about *how* instead of *where*. (Whittington, 1996) Also, the focus on practices links strategy research to other disciplines and their long theoretical and empirical traditions (Vaara & Whittington, 2012)

As said, *strategy as practice* approach is interested in the activities of individuals related to strategizing. According to Vaara & Whittington (2012), the strength of this perspective is in its capability to “explain how strategy-making is enabled and constrained by prevailing organizational and societal practices” (p.1). This approach is valuable also on the macro level. In many fields of academic research and management practices the focus has been on explaining the outcomes of a process happening in an organization rather than the activities it constitutes of – and had with many challenges with giving sustainable explanations. Supplementing the macro view with the micro could help tackling these challenges. (Johnson et al., 2003)

Shifting the focus from the macro level to the activities, the academia can also benefit the organizational actors more widely – the research agenda would match the day-to-day working life. (Johnson et al., 2003) The power and value of the approach is in explaining how the prevailing societal and organizational practices enable and constrain strategy-making. The SAP research has helped in gaining understanding to advance social theories in strategic management and broadened the scope of organizations in academic research. It has also offered alternatives to the performance-dominated analyses, but first and foremost given valuable insights regarding tools and methods in strategy-making. (Balogun et al., 2014; Vaara & Whittington, 2012)

This approach enables connecting practice-oriented organizational studies with contemporary strategic management research, as the focus is not merely in strategic decision-making but also in studying the process of the system. Compared to the mainstream strategy research, which is focused on the link between strategy and performance, *strategy as practice* has a broader outlook on the topic. Strategy as practice is interested in what happens in the strategy formulation process, planning, implementation and other matters related to doing and thinking of strategy and hence it can be seen as an alternative to the common strategy research. (Golsorkhi et al., 2014) In the Strategy as practice approach, strategy is not the company's property but continuously created in the doing of strategy work (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013)

Studying practices gives one the possibility to advance theoretical understanding while also producing insight that can benefit different members in organizations in practice. This is possible due to the fact that the field is studying the issues that are appropriate for the individuals dealing, planning or implementing strategies. (Golsorkhi et al., 2014) The history lies in the classics of strategy process research (Mintzberg et al., 1976; Mintzberg & Waters, 1985) but also in the aims to renew the field of strategic management. According to Golsorkhi et al (2014) central research themes in the field of *strategy as practice* are strategy work and different settings of it, formal strategic practices, materiality and tools in strategy work, sensemaking in strategizing, roles and identities in strategizing, power in strategy and discursive practices of strategy.

Strategy as practice research approach has received contribution during the latest years and regarding several topics. Jarzabkowski, Paul Spee, & Smets (2013) have studied the role and usage of different material artefacts – pictures, maps, data packs etc. – in strategizing activities. Local strategizing has been also linked with larger social phenomena (Seidl & Whittington, 2014). The roles and identities of different organizational members has been one of the areas of research among the *strategy as practice* researchers (Golsorkhi et al., 2014) So far, the SAP studies have demonstrated how complex, flexible and polyvalent strategic practices can be (Vaara & Whittington, 2012)

2.3 Participation in strategy work

In addition to the role of top managers (Aspara, Lamberg, Laukia, & Tikkanen, 2013), also the roles of the company board of directions (Forbes & Milliken, 2008; Sundaramurthy &

Lewis, 2003) and the middle managers (Thakur, 1998) have received attention in the academic literature. Traditionally, other organizational members have received only limited amount of attention in the strategic management literature, but there are a few authors (Laine & Vaara, 2015; Mantere & Vaara, 2008) who have improved the situation recently.

The SAP research has started to recognize different organizational actors in a wider range than allowed for the traditional focus. By doing so, strategist roles and identities are being problematized by underlining how engagement or exclusion regarding strategy is achieved in various and often subtle means. (Vaara & Whittington, 2012) The role of management in strategy work is emphasized and the others have the role of implementing the top management's ideas. Different streams of strategy research offer very different conceptions of participation as a phenomenon in strategic decision-making, strategy processes and strategic practices. (Laine & Vaara, 2015) It is possible for centralized organizations to manage tension between the benefits of an open strategy process and conventional emphasis on opacity in strategy making with participatory and inclusive practices. (Mack & Szulanski, 2017)

In their work among participation in strategy work, Laine and Vaara (2015) see participation being divided into four perspectives in the academic literature: participation as a non-issue, participation as a part of strategy process dynamics, participation as produced in and through organizational practices and participation as an issue of subjectivity. (Laine & Vaara, 2015)

The research where participation is not an issue sees strategy work related only to the tasks of top managers. The *strategy process dynamics* research sees strategy both as intended and emergent and highlights the role of middle managers in the strategy work, but also can see participation as an essential part of it. The third stream of research sees various actors included in the strategy work and sees their influence on participation. The fourth perspective builds on the concept of strategy work been produced in historical context and hence a special notice should be taken to rights, responsibilities and identities of the actors involved. (Laine & Vaara, 2015)

In a rare empirical analysis of participation, Mantere and Vaara (Mantere & Vaara, 2008) studied strategy work in large number of organizations. Based on the analysis of their research, they were able to identify discursive practices impeding and promoting

participation. According to Mantere and Vaara (2008), all discourses are always related to other social and material practices. Based on the discursive practices they formulated six discourses that have effects on participation. These discourses are presented in the table to follow. (Mantere & Vaara, 2008)

Discourses	Conception of strategy process	Subject positions	Linkage to other social practices	Effect on participation
Mystification	<p>Strategy process is driven by visions, missions, and other strategy statements that provide the basis for organizational activity.</p> <p>These strategies are normally not to be questioned or criticized</p>	<p>Top managers are given a central role as leaders defining the key strategies.</p> <p>This often involves “preaching” of the strategies to other organizational members (pastoral power).</p> <p>The role of the other organizational members is to follow the strategies and leaders, but not to question the legitimacy of the key ideas or the power position of the leaders.</p>	<p>Strategies are often crafted in closed workshops. Access to information is restricted.</p> <p>Use of special experts (e.g., consultants).</p>	<p>The exclusive right of top managers to define strategies and withhold information is legitimized.</p> <p>Other organizational members can participate effectively only in the implementation of the strategies</p>
Disciplining	<p>Strategy is linked to effective organizational discipline and command structures. Strategizing is usually seen exclusively as top management</p>	<p>Top managers are seen as the key strategists.</p> <p>This often involves “responsibility” but also heroification.</p> <p>The role of the others is to follow the guidelines and orders coming from the top.</p> <p>Disobedience is punished.</p>	<p>Strategy work is closely linked to organizational control mechanisms. Access to information is restricted.</p>	<p>Top managers’ key role in strategizing is legitimized and naturalized.</p> <p>Other organizational members can only participate in ways defined by their superiors.</p>

Technologization	<p>Strategy process is driven by a specific system.</p> <p>The system provides the rules to be followed.</p>	<p>Specific people—usually top managers—define the systems to be used.</p> <p>Organizational members are to follow the system.</p> <p>Specific actors have expert</p>	<p>Strategy work is closely linked to concrete systems and technologies.</p> <p>Access to information is controlled.</p>	<p>Legitimizes the use of specific systems, often effectively limiting the ability to bring up new perspectives or issues.</p>
Self-actualization	<p>Strategy process is about finding meaning in organizational activities.</p> <p>Ideally, this leads to emancipation at individual and organizational levels.</p>	<p>All organizational members can in principle participate in strategizing.</p>	<p>Strategy work is linked to microlevel (unit or group) strategy workshops and meetings.</p>	<p>Legitimizes separate group and individual-level strategizing efforts and even conflicting ideas</p>
Dialogization	<p>Strategy process involves dialectics between top-down and bottom-up processes.</p> <p>Ideally, this involves a constructive dialogue between different groups</p>	<p>The role of top managers as key strategists is not questioned.</p> <p>All actors that have a vested interest are to participate in strategy processes.</p>	<p>Strategy work is linked to concrete negotiation processes involving various internal and external stakeholders.</p> <p>Strategizing</p>	<p>Legitimizes top managers' special status as key strategists but not independently of other groups.</p> <p>Helps to give voice to other organizational members.</p>
Concretization	<p>Strategy process is seen as a natural, almost mundane part of organizational decision-making.</p> <p>Effective strategizing requires concrete and transparent rules and practices.</p>	<p>The role of top managers as key strategists is not questioned but expected to follow joint rules.</p> <p>Other organizational actors are to participate as specified by the joint rules.</p>	<p>Strategizing is intimately linked to normal organizational decision-making</p>	<p>Call for clear-cut and transparent rules helps to demystify strategizing and legitimize wide participation.</p>

Table 4 Discourses Impeding and Promoting Participation (Mantere & Vaara, 2008)

In the context of strategy work *participation* can be linked with deep ethical issues such as inequality in decision-making and managerial dominance. (Laine & Vaara, 2015)

Participation in strategy work is linked with the basic assumptions the organization members have regarding strategy work as a phenomenon (Mantere & Vaara, 2008)

Strategy processes often face participation problems, that are linked with the basic assumptions of strategy work (Mantere & Vaara, 2008). However, increasing openness also causes dilemmas in organizations. When the level of transparency and inclusion grow, characteristic problems emerge. These problems are sharp and can be divided into four categories: dilemmas of those of process, commitment, disclosure, empowerment and escalation. (Hautz et al., 2017) Also, including participants in strategizing can cause problems as participants can make selective use of the opportunities given (Luedicke, Husemann, Furnari, & Ladstaetter, 2017)

Traditionally strategy has been a hierarchical process, but it can also be a distributed process, where many individuals participate in different ways. However, the change from a hierarchical view to strategizing to an alternative one can be difficult. A communal approach can be easier in smaller divisions. Also, the change might release unexpected developments, both positive and negative. For example, the system might become more confusing and disorganized. Thirdly, the new way of doing things needs infrastructure for a new kind of accountability. The traditional role of the leaders is also challenged. (Cunha et al., 2011) Nevertheless, organizational design needs to be reconsidered due to the changes in competitive landscape. (Cunha et al., 2011)

A recent trend in strategy research is *open strategy* (OS). It sees a more broad and wide range of internal and external actors as participants in strategy making and is inclusive and transparent by its nature (Hautz et al., 2017). Open Strategy is an opposite approach to the traditional model of strategy-making (Birkinshaw, 2017) A large proportion of organizations such as Daimler and IBM have started to use OS by using information technology solutions to involve numerous people in strategy processes (Tavakoli et al., 2017). The concept and use of OS show that nowadays the size of the company should not restrict the opportunity to open the possibility to participate in others in addition to the top and middle management. The interactions in companies practicing OS are usually done virtually (Nketia, 2016).

There is a recent need to understand in what ways non-manager employees could participate and commit to strategy. Also, social media creates pressure for organizations to open up the strategy process for grassroots level informal activity (Baptista et al., 2017). OS is a solution to these needs and could support creation of a stronger commitment to strategy by employee participation. (Hutter et al., 2017) A research by Hutter et al. (2017) proposes that employee participation influences their commitment to strategy in four ways.

(1) Participating in OS creates higher sensemaking; (2) Higher individual empowerment is created via employee engagement in participation to OS; (3) Higher employee sensemaking will be associated to higher strategy commitment; and (4) Higher level of empowerment will lead to higher commitment to strategy. There are other authors who have underlined the direct benefits of participation, but Hutter et al. (2017) state that the positive effects are also non-direct.

A study by Baptista et al., (2017) indicates that applying more open approach to strategizing can result conditions for a more collective and agile governance model in general. Giving employees more freedom and ownership of their work, according to Baptista et al. (2017), needs the organization to be reflexive. Reflexivity creates conditions for *organizational authorship*, which makes individuals in an origination see themselves as active agents in the organization (Baptista et al., 2017).

2.4 Other research approaches to the phenomenon of participation

In addition to the academic tradition of strategy research, also other academic communities are approaching the same phenomenon of *participation* from different angles. Two most relevant in terms of this study are corporate governance and human resources management literatures.

In corporate governance research, the need for more collaborative and inclusive approaches has been noted by the literature. In 2003 there were scholars that saw tensions emerging between control and collaborative approaches to corporate governance. One of them were Sundaramurthy and Lewis (2003), who discussed the paradoxes of governance. As the business environment gets more and more unpredictable, the need for simultaneous control and collaboration is clear. Combining the two and managing both control and collaboration in governance is vital for successful performance. (Sundaramurthy & Lewis, 2003)

This traditional view of corporate governance controlled the academic discourse for a long time before new, more human approaches started taking over. And even though in practice things had started to change, it took a long time for the academia to shift the focus on the issue. (Daily, Dalton, & Cannella, 2003)

In the field of human resource management research, the corresponding term for *participation* is *employee involvement*. It has been studied that employee involvement has the potential to lead to better company competitiveness. A lot of employee involvement programs were established in the US after the 80's. The programs aimed to empower people in the organization to participate in different decision-making processes on topics that related both directly and indirectly to their work. These programs were promised to improve the company's flexibility and hence were especially appealing to the top management. However, there were a lot of problems in the mechanisms that supported one to get involved, during the process and rewarding of positive outcomes. Also, some of the middle managers saw it as a threat to their authority and all in all changing the current status quo was difficult for all parties. (Ahlbrandt, Leana, & Murrell, 1992)

Employee involvement is easier to build in an organization that has no history, but in an established corporation it requires a change in working culture, which is highly difficult to accomplish. (Ahlbrandt et al., 1992) The programs, policies and practices aiming towards higher employee involvement should also be fitted into the context of the firm. (Grawitch, Ledford, Ballard, & Barber, 2009)

Academic research shows that employee involvement programs that target improvement in decision-making, information sharing or skill application are more adequate than programs that aim at increasing goodwill or employee motivation. (Ahlbrandt et al., 1992) There are at least four barriers that have been identified in the academic literature that restrain the organization from implementing employee involvement strategies. Those are: organizational structure, the traditional top-down-management approach, the competitive strategy and the company culture. (Grawitch et al., 2009)

An important issue when it comes to employee involvement is to ensure that the personal incentives and expectations on the influence the participation has are in line (Ahlbrandt et al., 1992). A research by Anderson and Huang (2006) studied the ways in which the academic literature approached work empowerment and its link to customer relationship management. The study draws the conclusion that empowering employees by giving them a possibility to influence the goal setting and the strategies that relate to their work, also empowers the customers and increases the profitability of the company. (Demangeot & Broderick, 2010)

An important motivation to participate in a company's employee involvement program is to have a say the issues that relate to one's job. In a study conducted in 1992 employees of a manufacturing company wanted to have more influence on were their benefit and pension plans, profit sharing plans or rates and pay scale or wages. The employees considered to have enough power on the day-to-day work related issues. (Ahlbrandt et al., 1992) All of the reasons to participate or to not participate in the study related to the everyday life of the employee. Bigger decisions were not mentioned in the questionnaire, not to mention strategy.

3 Data and methods

The objective of this study is to better understand the role employees have in decision-making and strategy work by studying the practices that relate to participation in these two. This chapter aims to explain the methodological choices made in this research. The chapter will begin with an outlook to the research approach followed by the introduction of the three case companies the research is concentrated in studying. After that the data collection and analysis methods will be introduced. To conclude the chapter, an evaluation of the research process and notions on the limitations of the study are presented.

3.1 Research approach

3.2 Qualitative case study approach

The research was conducted as an explorative, qualitative multi-case study, as the aim was to better understand the nature of strategic decision-making in the selected companies and the role of employees in them. In order to gain this understanding, qualitative data where employees in different positions would describe their experiences, thoughts and desires, should be gathered and analyzed. The nature of the research questions and the topic as a whole was also the basis for the selection of the qualitative case study approach. According to Piekari & Welch (2009), case studies can be defined as a “research strategy” that uses different data sources in order to examine a phenomena in its natural context. Case studies are among business researchers an often-used way to present complex and hard-to-grasp business issues in an interesting, understandable and vivid manner (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, p. 116) According to Yin (2003), case studies allow a researcher to explore.

The aim of this study is to explore general causal laws that would predict the role of employees in companies. This is a positivist approach to research, and hence case study method is suited for the setting. The case study approach used in this research follows the approach of Eisenhardt (1989) who states that case studies are well suited in “the development of testable hypotheses and theory which are generalizable across settings” (p.546). In effect, the approach taken in this study is inductive by its nature, which means that theory building is created based on rich qualitative evidence in order to mainstream

deductive research (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). As a result of this study, a theory will be formulated and suggested for further research and testing.

As the aim of this study is to understand the role of employees in decision-making on a broader level, rather than looking at the practices in one case company, it was clear that there was a need to involve several case companies in the research. Another reasoning for multiple cases in addition to the research topic as such, is the fact that the aim of the study is to find the average situations in companies and formulate a theory based on them. By selecting multiple cases instead of just one, one can ensure a more robust basis for the analysis and findings of the study. This supports the analytical generalization and formulation of the theory (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2003)

3.2.1 Unit of data analysis

The aim of the study was to understand the role of employees in Finnish industrial production companies' decision-making and also participation in strategy work. The selection of the case companies was done together with members of Boardman's discussion forum, as the aim of the entire study was to give them valuable insights related to the topic. It was seen valuable to have different-sized companies onboard, as that could result in differences when it came to the analysis. Also, the companies selected needed to be traditional, in the sense that the companies could represent the average Finnish industrial production company. The original aim was to find four case companies for the study, but for practical reasons only three companies were able to participate in this study. The three companies are presented in the following chapter.

3.2.2 The case companies

The three companies were selected to the study based on three criteria that were selected in order to support literal and also theoretical replication. The aim was to find both similar and different results between the case companies. The criteria were:

- 1) The companies functioned in the field of industrial production
- 2) The companies had production in Finland
- 3) The companies represented different-sized organizations (one small, one medium and one big)

After the analysis phase it came clear that even though a long history was not a criterion for the companies, it was a common feature of all three. All of the companies were founded at least 40 years ago and had had production activities the entire time. How this has affected the results will be discussed further.

3.2.2.1 Company A

Company A is a global manufacturer. With around 10 000 to 20 000 employees over the globe, the organization is a public limited company. The Company has been founded more than 60 years ago and has a turnover of around 3 milliard euros. From Company A nine people from various backgrounds were interviewed. The interviewees represented two business lines of the company. Both business lines consist of several business units and business unit leader was the highest level of the organization represented among the interviewees. The majority of the employees interviewed worked in operations, but human resource management was also represented.

3.2.2.2 Company B

Company B is a family-owned international industrial production and technology company that employs from 1000 to 5000 people globally. The company was founded more than 50 years ago and has a turnover of around 300 million euros. The interviewees from this company were 15 people altogether who work for Company B in various positions varying from factory workers all the way up to the management team. The people I interviewed from Company B were working in production, HR, communications and marketing, sales, product development and management in two different business units and the supporting functions of the company.

3.2.2.3 Company C

Company C is a small workshop that supplies for bigger industrial production companies. The company is concentrated on producing items from stainless steel. Its main business is supplying to bigger companies, but it has also own products and does tailor-made solutions. As the company is very small, only 20+ employees, the size of middle management is very small. There are the people who sit in the management team and the people running the production – and only a couple of people managing a team. If people work in supporting tasks, they form teams of specialists of whom no-one is the leader. In this study I interviewed 11 people altogether from the company, which is a large

proportion of the entire company. The interviewees represented functions such as production, HR, sales, design and management.

3.3 Data collection

3.3.1 Empirical material

The empirical material collected for this study consists of semi-structured interviews, company stakeholder magazines, company website information and various discussions with company representatives and members of Boardman's (see Foreword) network. As case study method is all about "searching for what the case is about", and Boardman's networks enabled it, all relevant information sources were taken into use. Also, in the process of analysis, a lot of comments and feedback were given by the case companies, interviewees and also members of Boardman's network, and these comments act as additional material for this multi-case study.

Although the empirical material covered of several sources, the basis was built on interviews with employees in case companies. The reason interviews were conducted was the fact that they offer rich insight on the perceptions of individuals regarding their role in decision-making in different companies. Also, as the study was explorative by its nature, interviews offered the possibility to find unexpected topics or features, as the interviewees were given the possibility to speak quite freely. The interview questions concentrated on understanding the decisions the person took part in and made individually and also how they saw their possibilities of influencing the bigger decisions and strategy of the company. As the interviews were semi-structured, it gave the researcher the possibility to concentrate on a more specific topic based on the answers of the interviewee (Corbetta, 2003).

The interviews were recorded with the approval of the interviewees and transcribed verbatim in the language of the interview, which was Finnish in all cases. The dataset of this study consists of 32 semi-structured interviews, 40-60 minutes each. The quotes presented in this document are translated by the author from Finnish to English. Secondary data (e.g. shareholder magazines, financial reports, the companies' websites, discussions with the Boardman discussion forum members) was also collected to support the insights from the interviews and help to see them in a wider context.

After the selection of the case companies the research setting and goals were explained to a contact person in a one-to-one meeting with the company. The contact person was then responsible for scheduling the interviews with the people they had selected for the study. As I will discuss further in my findings, this meant that especially in the cases of the two bigger companies, the choice of interviewee might have had an impact on the image the study draws of the company at scope. Hence the results should be taken with certain limitations.

	Company A	Company B	Company C	All
Blue-collars	1	1	4	6
Lower management	1	1	0	2
White-collars	1	4	1	6
Middle managers	6	4	2	12
Top management	0	2	4	6
Total	9	12	11	32

Table 5 The interviewees

	Company A	Job titles of the interviewees
Blue-collars	1	machine assembly, factory logistics
Blue-collar team leader	1	team leader, production planner
White-collars	1	Human Resources Generalist
Middle managers	6	vice president / head of a business unit (x2) business unit operations director

		plant director
		workshop director
		human resources manager
Top management	0	
Total	9	

Table 6 Interviewees from Company A

	Company B	Job titles of the interviewees
Blue-collars	1	Work Safety Officer / Chief Shop Steward
Blue-collar team leader	1	Team Leader, Production Quality
White-collars	4	Production Development Engineer, Product Manager (2), Marketing Specialist
Middle managers	4	Plant Director, Product Management Director, Human Resources Manager, Communications and Brand Director
Top management	3	Director of Customer Experience, Vice President, Operations
Total	13	32

Table 7 Interviewees from Company B

Company C	Job titles of the interviewees
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Blue-collars	3(4)	Welder, Work safety officer / Welder, Chief Shop Steward / Welder, (Product engineer / Laser operator)
Blue-collar team leader	0	
White-collars	1(2)	Designer, Product engineer (/ Laser operator)
Middle managers	1	Production Manager
Top management	4	Sales Manager (2), CFO&HR Manager, Operative Manager, CEO
Total	11	

Table 8 Interviewees from Company C

In collecting the data, it was important to ensure the anonymity of the interviewees and the companies. Also managing expectations of the case companies and interviewees was crucial. These two issues were managed by ensuring the quoting secured anonymity. All of the case companies' contact persons and interviewees, in addition to the Boardman discussion forum members, were given possibility to comment on the findings of the study. All of the comments were taken into consideration in the finalizing of the research.

3.4 Data analysis

In the data analysis phase, the research followed an emergent logic, where the cases are under a process of "chasing" instead of treating them as fixed entities (Ragin, 1992). The analysis started with exploring the characteristics of each case. The focus was especially in one's capabilities to influence their own work but also in possibilities to participate in decision-making and strategy work. This phase started already under the data collection phase and moved the focus of the research closer to strategy processes. Secondly the focus of the analysis moved to top and middle managers' perceptions on the level of participation and the role of employees in their organization. Thirdly the focus shifted to the differences between different employee groups in terms of actual capabilities to participate in different decision-making processes and how the possibilities matched the aspirations of the employee group in general. During this analysis phase that followed emergent logic, the

goal was in finding the key characteristics of each case and the phenomena that related to the topic of participation. These phases resulted in a syllabus of each case, which are presented in the next chapter of the thesis.

Lastly, different practices impeding and promoting participation (Mantere & Vaara, 2008) in decision-making and strategy work were summarized. These results are presented in the discussion chapter. A set of managerial implications on issues that support or restrict the individual's capabilities to participate in a way that suits their willingness is presented in the final chapter. Multiple topics for further research were also discovered.

3.5 Evaluation and the ethics of the study

The purpose of this research has been to understand better the role employees have in industrial production companies and try to discover more generalizable characteristics related to the subject. In this chapter the focus is in validation and limitations this multi-case study might have.

3.5.1 Validation of the study

For qualitative research, a classic evaluation criterion is validity (Creswell, Miller, Creswell, & Miller, 2000). The trustworthiness of a study can be seen consisting of dependability, confirmability, transferability and credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The data and methodology chapter aims to give an open and transparent view to the entire process of this thesis work. In the discussion chapter I will compare the findings with previous research and analyze the common ground between them. To add on the interview data, I attended multiple events organized by Boardman somehow related to the topic and widened my understanding regarding the subject as a whole.

All in all, the main source of validation for this study were the comments received from the case companies and interviewees in the process of the analysis and finalizing of this study. All of the interviewees and also the company contact persons were given a version of this study and the findings for commenting and feedback. None of the interviewees nor the contact persons saw the findings misleading or untrustworthy. One of the interviewees expressed his concern on the anonymity of some quotations, and the quotes were re-formulated based on the feedback. Also, selected contact persons who were familiar with

the case companies from Boardman gave feedback that supported the trustworthiness of this study.

3.5.2 Ethics of the study

In terms of ethics, it has been important to ensure trust between the researcher and the interviewees. This has been done by securing the anonymity of the individuals interviewed. Also, they were given the possibility to comment the research findings. The company representatives were responsible for selecting the people for interviews, so there is a possibility that the interviewees do not represent the company as a whole. The results of this study should hence be generalized only with strong limitations. The interviewees see the company culture from the perspective of their own work environment. The answers cannot be generalized to represent the entire culture of the bigger companies not to mention how companies in general work. In the case of Company C as the interviewees' proportion of the whole company is so large (see 3.2.2.3 and Table 8), we can claim that the picture drawn based on this research can be quite accurate. As participation is strongly linked with the individuals' perceptions and subjective understanding of the company, interviewing some other employees in any of the case companies could have concluded in very different results. Also, the fact that the interviews were held in Finnish and translated by the author is not completely unproblematic. Some meanings are lost and some born during the process of translation. In order to ensure the quality of the translations, the interviewees have had the possibility to see and comment the translated quotes in the research findings. Language consultation was also used.

4 Findings

In this chapter I present the findings of this qualitative multi-case study. The findings in this chapter are divided in three, each of the cases is presented separately. The phenomena presented following are result of the inductive logic following analysis phase. From the rich dataset, I saw these aspects the most interesting. However, there were multiple other paths the research analysis phase could have followed. This have been said, the results give only a narrow outlook on the multi-faceted phenomenon of participation and in the case companies and their company cultures.

First, I will give a brief overview to the company characteristics that emerged from the research material. After this overview, I will present the findings regarding research question 1, which concentrated on the role of employees in the company's decision-making. The section after that will present the findings for the second research question, the role of employees in strategy work in the company. In the end of each of the case findings I summarize the key findings of the case in one section.

4.1 Company A - *How individual leaders can make a difference*

In this chapter I will present the first case company of this multi-case study. Based on the interview data, the most interesting phenomenon that emerged from the company was how individual team leaders can influence participation. The company is a traditional and hierarchical working place in general. However, individual leaders had a big influence on the role employees had in the decision-making and especially to the sense they had of their own possibilities to influence. Another interesting theme that emerged from the interviews was how there can be very different worldviews inside one company. There was an interesting paradox that was strongly present in the interview data: the strong hierarchies versus agile teams and influencing behind the curtains.

4.1.1 Company characteristics

Company A is seen as a hierarchical organization, but with pleasant colleagues. The employees saw that the organization had its pros and cons.

“Company A is pretty ok as a workplace, if we compare to other similar scale companies where I have been. Some things are better, and some things are worse. No big differences. Very similar to others in average.” (middle manager).

Compared to some other big corporations, the business of Company A was seen as more long term by nature. One of the business units in this case study produces big machines which take long to build. This was seen, in the viewpoint of the middle managers, good for the employees as they saw that it creates a sense of stability and sustainability.

Many of the interviewees had been working for the company for a long time, all except one that had been the company's employee for at least 10 years. The company is described to take good care of its employees and have long traditions. The fact that the company has old roots meant to the interviewees that the company really knows its business, but it also meant stiffness and that in some issues it had gotten into a rut. Then again some felt that the pace of the company was fast-moving and forward-looking.

“[...] We do good things, develop stuff. The requirements are high, I have liked [it here]. You are not stuck without anything relevant to do, instead you get to do things and develop them further.” (middle manager)

One interviewed middle manager felt that the employees, meaning the blue-collar employees, do not understand how well things were in the company compared to many other companies. The reason he saw for that was that “70% [of the blue-collar employees] have never worked elsewhere” and hence do not see the big picture.

Especially in the operations and production, it is typical for this company to have long careers. In the middle management and white-collar positions working in the company for a long time still means changing positions inside the company every now and then. But for the production staff, the blue collars, it was more typical still to have people working in the same tasks for years, even decades. According to the interviewees this issue needed to be solved as it was seen causing a lot of difficulties.

“It [long careers] acts as a deterrent to development that's what I think. There needs to be a good mix of those [people with different experience] that is important. People a bit lose the fact how the world has developed if one doesn't experience it. It is difficult to understand what the other is talking

about, if you have never been anywhere else. [...] If our company's employee turnover is very small, what does that mean? Is it so easy here? Do not we demand enough from our people if they stay here? Or could it be that we are just such a good company? Difficult to say.” (middle manager)

Also, the blue-collars saw that there was a big difference between the new recruitments and the more experienced workforce. They describe the situation in the way that the experienced see more downsides in things and sometimes people go against issues just for the sake of opening.

“To start with, I would like people to be trusted and that people down there would make decisions [self-governing], but we have a lot of people here who have been here for a long time. And not all of them are quite ready for it. Then we have the youngsters who would want it, it's not easy. [...] the two groups expect completely different things.” (middle manager)

4.1.2 Participation in decision-making

4.1.2.1 *Being trusted creates cooperation*

The blue collar and lower management personnel interviewed for this study saw themselves privileged compared to other colleagues working in the same factory in different positions. They felt their jobs were versatile, challenging and that they had good opportunities to influence their own work. Also, the workshop they were a part of had a good director and both of the parties seemed to have trust in one and other. The workshop team was seen as equals without any job titles.

“[...] Each of us has their own knowledge, something from a certain area. I think we can discuss pretty well, we support each other's decisions if that is among their area of know-how. I do not see us having any problems with dialogue and leadership here. But we are just a small part [of the factory] and I won't say anything about the workshop next to us even if I know stuff.” (blue-collar team leader)

“We have committed people here. [...] You create trust with people working with you and have a sense that we do these things here together. That is

something I have tried [to highlight] that we succeed in these things together.” (middle manager)

The workshop in this case is a place where the big product is put together, tested and then shipped to the client. That means that there is a lot of pressure and errors caused by other steps of the process that sometimes the workshop needs to back up. Based on the interviews, the big pressure and challenges require the team to work well together. Working with the projects, the employees often face surprising situations and unexpected problems, which then need to be solved. And based on the interviews the employees are trusted and have the capabilities to make the needed decisions.

“I think I make quite significant decisions that directly affect what the client gets and the costs that are created. A wrong decision causes a lot of expenses, even delay the project or lead to being late, which causes fines that are substantial.” (team leader)

“There are a lot of moving parts and a lot of changes [in our daily work at the workshop] so how we react to them in practice and think what issues [the changes] have an effect on. It is that kind of agility, I have good colleagues here. We have experience and young blood; the youngsters are learning here.” (middle manager)

The interviewees do not see themselves representing all the production blue-collar employees – not even the typical blue-collar employee working in the specific plant when it comes to the level on freedom and capabilities to make different decisions.

“[...] You have a bit poor interviewee because I’m so stubborn. If I notice that there is clear reasoning, for example otherwise the delivery [of the product] is delayed, I jump over [the superior]. And me and my superior have dealt with it well. He gives my decisions his full support, even if I would do them without asking. We clearly have good connection. He trusts me, and I trust him.” (team leader)

“When [my team leader] gave me the paper [information regarding the study] and asked if I wanted to participate, I thought that at least you get a positive picture, because they let me decide upon these tasks. It came into my

mind that if they had selected someone else who can't at all..." (blue-collar employee)

In their own workshop the atmosphere is seen good and the interviewees have a sense that everyone has the tools to influence their work, but not all want to use the opportunity.

"Some people are like that by their nature that they prefer whining behind the back and do not open their mouths." (blue-collar employee)

In addition to standing out from the other workshops' blue-collar employees, the workshop crew saw themselves also different from the other members of the organization, especially managers higher in the organizational ladder. When it came to higher directors in the organization, the factory workers saw the organization getting stiffer and more hierarchical.

"The higher you go, the more groaning you get. Our own work community functions well, but above that..." (blue-collar employee)

4.1.2.2 Lean gives the blue-collars tools to influence daily work environment

Among the interviewed middle managers, Lean methods were seen as a big opportunity for blue-collar employees to influence their work environment – the employees themselves saw the situation slightly differently. On the highest levels of the middle management interviewed, the furthest away from the everyday life of the production, the visions and expectations regarding Lean were the most optimistic.

"Things should be decided as low as possible so that we would have this kind of "army of problem solvers" kind of thing. I think [Lean] is a good philosophy, but of course in a big corporation there is often the case that who gets to decide what and in what [decision-making] grid. But there are a lot of small things that can help the organization solve problems and take it forward. (middle manager)

"The process-driven way of thinking might be a good thing. But it takes its time [to be taken into use]. (middle manager)

There was still some mumbling among the employees regarding the Lean practices according to the interviewees, even though the “Lean-way of thinking” had been in use for a while already in some parts of the production. Still, positive features were also seen.

“[...] we have the Lean way of doing things which is more than just the [visual leadership]boards [...] It has guided us to the way where we do things in the right order in the right way, without extra steps.” (blue-collar team leader)

It seems that the Lean practices are still in the process of implementation. Among the blue-collar employees, the attitudes toward Lean were more cynical compared to the middle managers’ perception.

“[...] the boards, which are more for the visitors, to make this place look nicer. In a way ”hey we have this Lean here”, we can do marketing that we do things in the Lean way.” (team leader)

“My comment [in an info meeting regarding implementation of Lean methods in the factory] was that here we have been talking babble for four hours, and the end result is that no-one of us knows what the system can do. [...] Here we then have a lot of paper done to wipe the spillages caused by Lean.” (blue-collar employee)

“It is extremely slow to get the system work, to get the right participants to the wall room meetings and see the role of the people participating. We have a lot of work there to be done, but definitely [it functions well]! (middle manager)

In the blue-collar employees’ eyes Lean represented another decision made somewhere higher in the organization that they just had to deal with.

But it’s coming, it’s coming, there is nothing you can do about it. I know how it sounds but you do not need to understand it.” (blue-collar employee)

4.1.2.3 The tight matrix box of the middle managers and white-collars.

“You need to know the people who make the decisions and influence the issues before the decision is made formally.” (middle manager)

Company A is a matrix organization, which means that the organization consist of business lines that represent different businesses, but the people are also organized based on their functions. Based on the interview data, this causes a lot of restrictions to the freedom and power middle management level and white-collar employees have.

As decisions were understood touching multiple parties in a matrix organization, this meant that the decisions were made together with colleagues.

“Nowadays decision-making is typically such, where you discuss with your colleagues and together think what should be done. In a big organization like this, where we are in the matrix, it is rare to make decisions by yourself.”
(middle manager)

The difficulty to make decisions in general in a matrix organization emerges broadly from the data, especially from the interviews of the managers. There are always people who the decisions made have an effect on, and some of the interviewees see it as part of the deal working in a matrix type of an organization.

How to live in the matrix is, however, perceived very differently among the interviewees. Some feel as if they are in a trap, others knew that in order to survive, one needed to play the *matrix game*. The interviewees mention many times that one needs to understand their role in the company and that what is the “box” one can operate in.

“Living in a matrix organization is a bit different, but here we are always stuck with finding out who decides on things. Or which forum and then we know who the president of the forum is.” (middle manager)

“Understanding the fact that there will be always things that come from the global organization, which you cannot decide, you just implement them, and the decisions are made when you think how to take the decisions to practice. Along the lines of my approval grid I know my place.” (middle manager)

“Sometimes I feel as if the headquarters had forgotten that the company has production as well. There might be an issue that “has to be” implemented to all employees, but the case is that blue-collar employees do not have the company email addresses or computers and then we have these new fancy e-

learning materials there, it creates a lot of practical problems and we are lost how to implement those” (white-collar employee)

“That’s the way it is, you can test your borders a bit. Someone will tell you if you cross a line. Sometimes it is said in a nicer way, sometimes a bit more negatively. But if you do not do anything criminal or incomprehensibly bad for the company, usually you won’t get fired. (middle manager)

“[...] perhaps the beauty and horror of living in a matrix organization is that every now and then you use the side track. Understanding the meaning of networks and being aware of things and that you can act in the right time and place before the decision is made. It’s a form of art in a way. There is so much information and the organization is big that sometimes happens so that you weren’t in the sweet spot where you should have been, and the decision is made before you have had the chance to influence.” (middle manager)

According to the data, the sense of hierarchy in the company comes from the sense that you are not allowed to make decisions regarding issues that relate directly to your work. One of the key issues mentioned in the interviews with the middle managers was the restricted possibilities to recruit new staff when needed. The global HR took centralized responsibility over the big picture of the number of recruits per year – annually the Company A:s board made decisions on how many new “licenses” were given to each business line and that meant that how many completely new jobs can be created during that year.

When it comes to replacing people – hiring a person when someone is retired, goes to a study or paternal leave, the business line management team needs to confirm them as well. The factory worker has no possibilities to influence a new hiring, nor can the white collars. Also, the middle managers need to get the confirmation to hiring – even in the case of a three-month-study leave from several steps up the organization ladders. This causes a lot of frustration among the middle managers responsible for the production – they feel that are given the responsibility to meet the production targets and goals but not the freedom or tools to act accordingly. Many feels that they are not trusted.

“These HR-policies we have, have been really strict, we have been asking for every new license from the CEO for some time already. [...] If you are

responsible over a business, you need to have more freedom to make decisions regarding issues like this.” (middle manager)

“In the end I have responsibility over my business’s performance and profit. So, if I would like to hire a couple of people more, I think I should be able to take the responsibility over it.” (middle manager)

Some have started using subcontractors and have a mixed palette of workers from different backgrounds working in the factories. This has caused a lot of tensions among the workers as the extra work power is not as experienced in working with the products, and as they are not real employees, they are not educated and trained in the same way by the company. In some factory locations there, many workers opposing the usage of subcontractors as it puts the workers in different position with the permanent workers. Which might mean that the company is working with too little resources due to the strict policy in hiring.

“Thinking about them [the strict recruitment approval grids and policies] in some situations would bring agility to the fastness of the decision-making that is something to consider. How to divide the things where you do not need the business line or the corporation’s management team’s approval but could instead be made on a lower level. The approval chain would not be so crowded and the getting the approval would not take so much time.” (middle manager)

According to the interviews, the traces of this strict approval policy leads to the years when the company had to cut operations and tighten the belt. As employees are a big cost for the company, it is understandable that by restricting the level of employees the executives can very effectively keep the cost level down. Still, also in the grass roots level, the workload seems to be too much sometimes, and many see a clear need to hire more “own” people to production.

“I think after many rounds of employer/employee negotiations we are getting more performance out of the current employees, but at the moment we are pushed for resources with these work levels. I could imagine that people are getting really tired with work, we would need more people to certain tasks.” (blue-collar team leader)

In addition to the recruitment policy, there were also other issues the employees needed to deal with without the sufficient possibilities to influence. Many of the issues were such that the employees would have wanted to be involved in planning, but there were also issues that the interviewees saw a need to be fixed but didn't have the possibility to do so. One example of these issues was a human resources employee who saw the need for wider recognition of the wellbeing of the employees. But didn't feel having any say in which issues are in the center of the strategy.

"I would wish that in some point they would wake up to the fact that how much people work here, people have really big workloads. Mental wellbeing in the white-collar side should also be an issue that when the next employee/employer negotiations come, will those with issues with their well-being be the ones that will be gotten rid of first? Is that what we are waiting for? Or could we proactively somehow think about this. [...] We tried to create our own well-being survey [...] we tried to suggest it to [the business unit director], but he was asking that "has this been instructed from somewhere, is there some material coming, we cannot do this alone, who is going to pay for it?". So, our hands are tied in issues like this." (white-collar employee)

This applied to other issues as well, many of the middle managers saw it important to give people more freedom to people working with issues they at the moment needed to ask for a mandate higher. The white-collars called for more involvement in issues that came to their table for execution.

"We need to be more agile, it creates well-being at work when you know what is expected of you and what issues I can decide upon. I also create flexibleness to the client work when the project manager can make the decisions there and then without asking for permission" (middle manager)

"That's the only thing that bothers me a bit that we are so far from the global processes. I do not need to know everything, but it would be good to know a bit more as the operative superiors ask us about the things" (white-collar employee)

Due to the matrix organization model and tight recruitment policies, Middle management positions that operate in several markets do not have the capabilities to actually control the business they are supposed to. And even if they would have ideas on how to reshape the organization, or the organizational structure, the changes are very difficult to move forward.

“[...] as I have business in all of the markets and operation in all of the regions, there isn't one place I could see what kinds of position they have open regarding the needs of my business. For example, if I wanted for us to add our capacity to our local maintenance services with 100 people during the coming two years, I could not tell if the locations had ten, zero or 50 vacancies open at the moment.” (middle manager)

“Another issue is that the limit regarding commercial terms is pretty tight. When you have the responsibility over the business, you should have more room to play in. I prepare and present issues [to my superior] that I could be the decision maker on. My sales director presents something for acceptance to me and me to my superior and he talks with various quarters. It creates huge slowness, when it comes to risk management it's okay, but looking at the big picture it is a bit too heavy. (middle manager)

“We make suggestions after another, but no decisions are made, and, in some cases, we end up in an eternal treadmill.” (middle manager)

4.1.3 Participation in strategy work

The image that the interview data created of strategy work in Company A was that it's a very traditional, top-down, waterfall-type process, where the top management makes the big decisions and each business line and business unit management team formulates their strategy within the given guidelines. None of the interviewees participated in the main process, some took part in creating the business unit level strategy. The opportunities to influence to the strategic choices made was seen quite narrow among all the interviewees.

“In the strategy process we involve every year young acknowledged talents, we call them high potentials. We have workshops they participate in and get

refreshing outlooks to the strategy work. I haven't been part of [the process].
(middle manager)

"I think I can [influence the strategic decisions] by influencing my own superior who sits in the company's management team. I think I also have some places to comment some issues related to strategy, but mostly it goes via him. I can't say I would have a lot to say to the company level issues, everything goes via my superior." (middle manager)

Some of the middle managers had opinions on the quality of the strategy process itself and the choices made. There was a strong sense of searching for the best way forward for the entire company, and many middle managers had opinions on what that would be.

[...] The management teams sit there, and the turnover isn't high, so that means that they discuss the same ideas year after another. But how could we get new viewpoints and so-called stupid questions [to the strategy work] that is how to renew thinking and get things forward." (middle manager)

"I have liked that we have these must win [strategic battles], and it's good that [the CEO] hasn't touched those. You need to have those at least for five years [...] so it's easier to act according to them. (middle management)

The blue-collar and white-collar employees interviewed didn't feel they could influence strategy processes or the company's big decisions, the big guidelines come from above. The blue-collars didn't see a need for higher involvement, but the white collars had more will to participate.

"I'm not paid to do that. I'm paid to do what I do and what I can work on."
(blue-collar employee)

Also, some of the middle managers didn't see a need to participate in the strategy work. They were more concerned about developing their own area of responsibility, the big guidelines were others to decide. Middle management saw their role implementing the strategy.

"[I can influence] by doing my part, checking what the strategy is, what are the goals and the focus in the big picture and try to understand which

direction the company is going and try to aim to that same direction. We are all in the same boat here, someone keeps the track right and we are the engine that takes it to the shore.” (middle manager)

Based on the interviews the strategic policies in the company weren't usually communicated directly to the grass roots level, instead the message is carried down the organizational pyramid, which some interviewees saw troublesome. It meant that the policies needed to be explained over and over again in every step of the pyramid. Some interviewees would have liked the information to be available directly to everyone. The information flow from the grass roots level up is also seen as a challenge regarding the role of the employees as decision makers in general.

“As we are so big, it [information flow from the factory workers] is difficult. There are all these labor unions and other stuff. In between there is a lot of decision-making happening, where also parties outside the organization take part.” (middle manager)

Some of the middle managers, however, see that recently there has been improvements in implementation and communicating the strategy to the organization.

“We have done these kinds of superior discussions, town hall [info meetings] and the [company's] management team makes these kinds of road trips around strategy. So, there is a lot done in order to take the strategy to practice and for everyone to understand what our thing is, there has been done good work recently.”(middle manager)

4.1.4 Case A in a brief

To conclude the chapter, case A is generally speaking seen as an average, big industrial production company with its good and bad features. However, the reality inside the company is very different for different employee groups. The blue-collar employees interviewed for this study all worked in the same workshop that had a very open and trusting culture manifested by the workshop manager. For others interviewed, the white-collars and middle management, the matrix organization sometimes was seen as a place with very limited possibilities to influence.

In decision-making, the Lean-methods offer the production employees tools to influence their own work and also to the production in general. The white-collars and middle managers do not have a similar opportunity or role in the organization. For them, the possibilities to influence rely much on their individual networks and persuading skills. Many shared the feeling of not being able to influence enough to issues that affect their work.

According to the interviews, the strategy process in the company is very traditional, top-down strategy. Some of the middle-managers had ideas and interest towards participating more, but especially the production employees, both blue-collars and middle managers, didn't see that it should be their task to participate. They saw themselves as parts in a machine, where everyone has their role to play.

Even if the organization as a whole was perceived hierarchical and stiff, the case showed how teams can still function in a very agile and different way. In the company the manager had a big influence on the team cooperation culture and creation of trust.

4.2 Company B – *Where the white-collars would want to participate*

Based on the interview data, Company B was seen as a “good company” to work in. The most interesting theme regarding participation that came evident from the interviews was the misalignment between the practices of formulating the new company strategy and the individual's motivations to participate. There was a wide number of employees, white-collars and middle managers, who would have wanted to participate more in the process. However, the strategy process appeared being very traditional and non-inclusive to others outside the top management.

In company B, the differences between different employee groups regarding the sense of power to the strategic decision-making was also evident. The product managers and blue-collars had a strong sense of empowerment to influence the big decisions of the company with their work. The supporting functions employees, both white-collars and middle managers struggled badly with the lack of possibilities to influence inside the company.

4.2.1 Company characteristics

Many of the interviewees had worked in the company for a long time and a few had even returned there after a while elsewhere. All the people I interviewed had been working for Company B for more than five years, many over ten. It was also typical for the employees in middle management or white-collar jobs to have worked for Company B for some time in the past, changed jobs to another company, but then came back.

Company B was seen as a company that was worth coming back. Reasons for returning back were first and foremost good colleagues and new challenges that one could find inside the company. Some had had poor experiences from bigger companies where they felt their position challenging as they were forced to implement top-down decisions that were unreasonable for the market. Company B was seen more flexible and “just the right size” compared to those experiences. Also, some had returned back or come to work for the company due to the fact that it was a family business.

The decision-making culture in Company B was described as “slow”, “unorganized” and “risk avoiding”. There were big differences among different functions, even between individual leaders. The biggest reasons for slowness in the decision-making processes were different approval grids and risk avoiding. In a situation, where one needed to ask for approval for an investment or another decision that they didn’t have the mandate decide for themselves, the decisions seemed to be delayed sometimes. The interviewees saw that the reason was that their superior had a lot of work and this decision didn’t prioritize in the superior’s task list. Employees who faced this slowness also saw that when a topic was important enough, the decisions were easy to get quickly. Work safety related issues in the factory context were mentioned as one.

The requirement of taking decisions up also makes the operations slower. However, it also creates commitment to other parts in the organization.

“One good example of this is our website renewal. As we are not changing software, it won’t take much money. And I know our strategy, I know what I’ll do about it and I have talented people doing it. This is a typical situation, where I’ve could have just started executing. But then we go through the discussions. Okay, of course the people respond to me that do as you please,

sounds good, but [the fact that I need to discuss with everyone] makes them more involved and committed. But it slows things down.” (middle manager)

Risk avoidance was a topic that arose in multiple interviews. Many interviewees representing middle management and white collars saw that many issues were discussed a lot – in the company corridors, between two people, in management teams, but it was common that decisions weren’t able to be made as the mentality in the organization was that there was not enough information for the decisions to be made correctly.

“The decision itself might not be made, or the decision is that “let’s do some more research”. Making decisions is sometimes really hard and takes a lot of time. I would want us to make decisions faster and with less information. If we wait to get all the possible information, it might take us the entire year gathering the information when it comes to the big decisions.” (middle manager).

This was the case especially in the supporting functions and product management based on the interviews. Many of the interviewees saw that the fact that the decision-making is so hesitant creates rumors that start to grow in the coffee rooms. They were asking for more courage to make decisions even with less information – and the willingness to later decide to change the decision if it turns out that the decision was wrong. The top and middle managers working in operations saw a big difference between the decision-making culture in the operations function and other parts of the company.

“[In the management team] one needs to ask several times that have we made a decision regarding this issue or not before it is clear. But in the operations’ management team we all are quite operative people, have similar straightforward style. Decision-making is easy, we make decisions if we want to” (middle manager)

“My predecessor said that in the [company] level it has been challenging, as there are so many who think differently about the issues and have constricting agendas and focus in what need to be done. [...] I suppose I will face it when I go one level below the top management, there the resistance appears, I guess. It depends how the Presidents have communicated the

importance of the matter we are doing. It needs to come from them.” (middle manager)

The same phenomena that was present in Company A that the decisions needed to be taken up the organization pyramid, even if the best expertise was within the people doing the background work was present in Company B. Reasons for this was that the superior would have a better big picture of the issue and hence they could see the need and effects of the decision made to other parts of the organization as well.

Often times, however, the decisions that were taken up in the organization ladder were just waiting for the superior’s signature – the decisions were so small or insignificant that the need for broader understanding was very limited. In many cases, this meant that the person, who had to make the formal decision, didn’t prioritize the issue as it was not acute or meaningful for their work. The person had a lot of other tasks to do and little time to spare. That led to delays and long waiting times for the people whose work the decisions did affect and caused frustration and inefficiency.

“Last fall I started talking [to the superior] that we need new machines. The message was like sure sure. But the decision-making itself is the fact that delays [the ordering process]. If we had ordered the new machine last fall, we would already have it. But now the distributor announced that if we order the machine now, we would get it in February [and we would need it now].

4.2.2 Participation in decision-making

Even though the majority of people saw Company B as a good employer, many people saw a lot of issues that could be done better in the company. Especially the decision-making processes was a topic that arise a lot of different opinions among the interviewees. Many people saw that the recent changes in the organization, growth and restructuring had taken the company downhill a notch. The employees saw that it had to be so that always when the number of people in the organization grows, there needs to be more roles and bureaucracy to make things work. But some were missing the “human center nature” the company “used to have more”.

There is a big difference in the perceptions of hierarchy in Company B between the employees and management team members. The top management saw that the company is

a really flat organization, where employees can easily get their voices heard. The interviewees saw that the employees are involved in decision-making more than in average company. Yet the middle management, depending on the function they work in, felt differently. One of the top managers who had been working for the company for some time in the past saw that compared to those days, when she was working in a business unit management team, the decision-making would be more open nowadays. Although they understand that this might not be the way all employees see the case.

“[In Company B] hierarchy is extremely flat. Well it depends, when we go outside of Finland, in some countries the situation is a bit different, but I’m sure in those countries compared to [other companies] the hierarchy is extremely low. And it’s easy to talk and take things forward from all the steps of the organization. It is a very distinctive characteristic for us, lack of hierarchy. (top management)

“I bet if you go and ask from the field someone has an opinion that nobody here listens to me, but I have a sense that here if you have will and interest, we have the channels open and we listen to people. In that way this is a really flat organization, it is not hard to be heard.” (top manager)

“I think [...] [the employees’ possibilities to influence inside the company] have weakened. That’s my instinct about it.” (middle manager)

According to the interviewees, the managers and management team makes the decision who to include in the decision-making process. There are issues the managers see the need for wider inclusion of employees. Those issues are such that they see clearly relating to the employees’ everyday work. However, the managers see the role of management to make broader decisions without the employees. There are clear roles for everyone in the organization.

“But then when we talk about issues such as in how many factories we produce goods in or should we run down or set up a factory plant it is a very limited amount of people who participate in making that kind of a decision. In that case we do not start to engage people to the decision at all.” (top management)

In the supporting functions and among the white-collar workers the managers mention the recent project that aims to renew the office layout as an important project where the employees have been included in the planning of the new office successfully.

“There are several teams and a lot of people involved in thinking about the matter because it affects people’s everyday work, work well-being and other things.” (top manager)

4.2.2.1 The shop steward feels included

Company B’s chief shop steward saw the decision-making practices regarding the topics they negotiate related to the legal status of the shop steward very clear, open and straightforward.

“[I can influence] pretty much all issues that relates to employees. They always need the approval from the chief shop steward. [...] I can suggest pretty much anything when needed.”. (blue-collar employee)

In Company B, the relationship between the chief shop steward and other shop stewards and the company management is close and warm based on the interviews. The chief shop steward strongly felt that the company wants to involve shop stewards broadly to the development of the company. He had been asked to give opinions on issues that the company according to the law would not need to ask him.

“The CEO has said to me that if there is anything, just call me. I can just go where ever I want, I do not need to even call, I can just look if they are free from their calendar and go and talk.” (blue-collar employee)

Also, from the management point of view, the cooperation with the shop steward was seen good and well-functioning.

“[The cooperation works] very well. We have a lot of local agreements, many department specific agreements regarding the nature of work and need of those. We have taken the local agreement-making really far, have really good contacts to the shop steward and via him to the entire production staff. (middle manager)

The chief shop steward has the right to define all the policies regarding the legal issues for the employees and who they take with them among the employees to represent if in some issues there needs to be as many representatives from the employee and employees present. Other employees contact them a lot regarding contracts and they feel like they represent the entire factory personnel when negotiating. But not all employees understand that sometimes one needs to make compromises when negotiating for example about wages with the HR department. He felt they do not understand “how the system works”.

“[The other blue-collar employees] do not understand that one needs to see the company as a whole. They only want to think about themselves and do not understand that there are others working in this factory, three other teams and also other companies whom those [policies] affect.”

The chief shop steward felt that there were no issues he would not be able to influence by discussing. The latest thing he took forward was founding a gym to the plant. The idea he got from the employees, although they had just asked for a weight lifting room, but he took the idea up a notch. Also, the managers responsible for the factory personnel strongly feel that the relationship with the shop stewards and via them to the employees is really good.

4.2.2.2 A well-working Lean

Continuous improvement and Lean methods are used in the company to pinpoint problems that hinder efficiency or production. This has seen as a good way for all the employees in the product development and production to get their voice heard. If a tool is missing, there are constantly gaps in the process or something else hindering the functions of the factory, the managers want to hear that and also give the workers resources to tackle these issues directly.

The factory staff is seen as a part of a well-oiled machine, where each and everyone has their role to play.

“We do not ask people what to do about the problem with the screws, we just ask people to tell us that there has been a situation that doesn’t go according to the standards. Then we have another set of people where there are quality engineers who look at the loss reports and decide what we do about them.” (middle manager)

“[...]That way we can change it so that even if some Jack would be there screaming the loudest, his problem might not be the biggest in the entire factory. It might also be that Lily, why isn't so loud about herself, but has every time written the report card, we can qualify that and target our few resources and find the way to systematically solve these issues. (middle manager)

Especially in the operations function and factory work, Lean methods are mentioned as a tool for the employees to influence the issues related to their work.

“I feel I have all the data in my hands constantly and everyone has participated in creating it. This means I do not need to separately ask people for their opinion on issues. [...] Of course, there are always people who do not want to fill these papers [in order to report issues], say they just work here, do their job and go home, but there is a big proportion of people who do take part.” (top management)

Lean methodology works well in the eyes of managers getting insight from the factory workers regarding issues that would require actions and improving. Some managers saw possibilities with Lean to help also white-collar workers' work efficiency.

“We have wall room at use in our customer service, there is also loss in their work. They can write to a piece of paper [the issues] and then we collect the papers and develop projects where we try to get rid of those silly things. No matter what job, there is loss everywhere. You can make everything better with Lean methods.” (top management)

4.2.3 Participation in strategy work

Company B's most recent strategy process was a very traditional top-down process. The strategy was done by the management team, the top managers of the company. An even smaller task force, members of the management team, lead the strategy making process. Simultaneously the organization structure of the company changed.

A member of the task force interviewed for this study saw that the employees weren't involved enough in the process. A member of the management team, who participated in

the strategy process saw that the management team was so “scattered and disagreeing” that it would not have been wise to include more people to the process.

“There were three of us, [...] If we were the “steering group”, management team was the project team and did a lot of work [around strategy]. Then we had once or twice some reference groups who gathered around [strategy]. I do not think the employees got involved enough. (middle manager, former top management member)

“Usually I like that people are involved, but in that case, it was not so. The majority of people would have been intimidated by how apart we were from each other and it could have led to bad consequences if people had really seen what the situation was. It [the strategy process] was also a lot about educating the management team to think in one way, it was a long journey that is still continuing.” (top management)

In general, the middle management sees their and also the other employee groups’ capabilities to influence issues in the company level quite narrow. In Company B the white-collar workers in general saw their role in strategy work only implementing it. The chief shop steward sees he can influence the strategic decisions via discussing with the CEO, as they have a warm relationship.

“I think [I can influence the company’s strategy] by discussing, my superior is the third biggest boss here and also directly to the CEO.” (blue-collar employee)

Some felt their function more influential than others. In the field of operations many felt that they can influence the company by doing their job well, as it directly links to the profitability of the company and hence fulfilling strategy. Some of the white-collar employees, however, saw their possibilities to influence very narrow.

“Not in any way [I participated in the strategy process]. I think my overall possibilities to influence the big picture is really small. (white-collar employee)

“If we talk about new product development, we need to always reason the fact with what suits our strategy. But I can’t influence what is said in the strategy.” (white-collar employee)

Employees working directly with products and product development saw their biggest possibilities to influence by making decisions regarding the product development and management.

“Well of course [I can influence] when I’ve been part of the product development projects. [There we decide] what kinds of products we have and create. A couple of years ago there was this one aluminum product which required a finalizing stage, I ideated and produced it and it was transported to another workshop as well and created 50 000€ in savings for the company.” (team leader)

“To [the direction Company B is going as a company] I do not have anything to do with. Except via these products. We have, I do not know how many, thousands of products, and if a couple of new ones are created, it maybe has a small difference. But in the end not really significant, I think. (white-collar employee)

There are also differences in the employees would have wanted to participate more. The blue-collar didn’t see a need for a more inclusive approach, the company was seen representing a “certain type of an organization”, where the system was as it was. Yet some of the middle managers and white-collar interviewed would have wanted the process to be more inclusive, but not everyone.

“We have a certain type of an organization and certain amounts of money each can decide upon” (blue-collar employee)

“I would have wanted to [participate in strategy work], but I haven’t had the possibility. Let’s say it this way. Because this change in the strategy is one of the most important things HR should be involved. So that we would understand what direction we are going to, what kind of employees we need and how to support the employees in the change, we should be on the track.” (middle manager)

“All of these big organizational changes are decided somewhere high above, but I’ve always wondered why they do not ask [us employees] any opinions. After all [the top management] is pretty far away from the regular, day to day work, so maybe they should ask. [...] I feel the decisions made [now] are a bit strange.” (white-collar employee)

Most of the white-collar employees and middle managers interviewed who did not see the need for wider possibilities to influence worked in product development or production. As mentioned earlier, many of them felt that they had sufficient possibilities to influence based on the nature of their work with products.

“Not really, I’m quite happy in this small spot of mine. We [product managers] have in the end quite good opportunities to influence the end result what we do, how it is been manufactured and so on. Quite adequate.” (white-collar employee)

“To the main direction of the company I have little power over, and I do not assume I would have” (middle manager)

At the same time, while the strategy has been created with a top-down process, the interviews show that the implementation is not perhaps going as planned. According to the interviews, there seemed to be a lot of debate over the level of strategy implementation and how it should be done.

“We sat around the [new strategy] for quite a lot of time. 20 to 30 days altogether creating the strategy. I participated in almost all of the sessions. I’m happy with the strategy, at the moment I’m more asking for people to act according to the strategy as we have planned.” (top management)

“We have these two business units, from which the other one is more independent. If we decide something, it might be so that they do not follow the decisions.” (middle manager)

“As I’m no longer a member of the management team, [my possibilities to influence] have weakened. [...] Especially to the fact how in other parts of the organization are done things according to strategy.” (middle manager)

“When the CEO’s strategy round came to an end, I was really worried how are people going to read this in our business unit, I would have wanted instructions for interpretation right away, but it took us one year to get the interpretation from our business unit. (middle manager)

Even though it seemed that widely in the organization top management was seen justified in creating the strategy and making the strategic decisions, there still were many issues employees would have like to be developed but didn’t have the means to influence. This applied mostly to middle management and white-collar employees who weren’t working in operations. They were asking for changes to the way the company was structured, but also openness and sense of community.

“What I would do is somehow centralize our work. We have four communications teams in the house and we do a lot of overlapping work. That I would want to make happen.” (middle management)

“Changes in the organization structure are typical [issues I cannot influence]. Someone has just made the decision to combine two businesses and those are legal companies that need to be put together [...] I have said many times that when they start planning things like that that directly influence employees to have some of us [the human resources department] included earlier, so that we could see the situation from the employee’s perspective.[...] It is difficult for us to justify the solutions for the employees if we haven’t participated.” (middle manager)

“I have always said that HR should be close to business, I do not understand this support function HR at all. In this day and age HR should sit in the business. I have communicated this forward, let’s see if it changes someday.” (middle manager)

The HR people saw it is should be their role to make sure that the voices of the employees gets heard in the organization, in case it isn’t heard in some other way. Another way for being heard was via superiors.

“Difficult to say [how much employees participate in decision-making]. I am sure employees are listened to and among white-collars [the messages] move forward via superiors as normal.” (middle manager)

“When last year we started to think about the sales development, we had the sales management onboard and they represent their own field operations. But the field operations itself was not in any way included. They are the receiving party, but of course the sales management knows their team, their ways of working and the clients and bring the outlook from there. (top manager)

“We have a flat organization, but of course it is quite difficult for a basic employee to go and talk to the CEO, [the issues] go forward via superiors.” (middle manager)

4.2.4 Case B in a brief

All in all, what was interesting in case B, was, again, the different realities the blue-collar and other employees lived in terms of participation in decision-making or capabilities to influence. The employees were involved via the chief shop steward and the collaboration between him and the top management was well-working. Lean-methods were also seen as a well-working system to get the production employees' voice heard - and also the blue-collar employees felt so.

On the contrary, the white-collar employees and middle management didn't have similar possibilities to influence their own work, and more importantly to the strategy. There was a big group that called for more participation, as the employees saw strategy directly affecting their work. Many of the managers had also noticed that there were problems in implementing the strategy, some were able to see the connection between this and the closed top-down strategy process.

4.3 Company C – *“Strategy, it's not what I'm paid to do”*

Company C is seen as a pleasant workplace with some baggage from the past. The most interesting phenomena regarding participation that emerge from the interview dataset is the lack of will form the employees to influence to the company's big decisions in general. In the company, the majority of employees saw themselves as cogs in a machine that everyone has their role in – and that if the “upstairs” people do their job, there will be work for the blue-collar employees as well. There are some people that see the value in getting input from all members of the organization, but the blue-collar employees interviewed are

not eager to participate. The shop stewards are seen as the representatives of the employees' voice. Again, these results do not cover all topics that emerged from the empirical material.

4.3.1 Company characteristics

The employees mention solid colleagues and challenging work as main reasons they have stayed in the company for a long time. Also, in this company, it is very typical to have been in the company for a long time – nevertheless there are also a handful of new additions to the team.

“I suppose it's not completely bad [place to work] as I have been here for so long” (top management)

The company is located near a larger city, and many of the interviewees mention short commute or location as reasons for selecting the company. The production employees appreciate the company for good working conditions: the products are not mass produced, which gives positive kind of challenge and makes the work versatile. The tools given are in appropriate condition and the physical working environment is convenient – a light and warm hall isn't always a self-evident truth. The company is a supplier to other, usually bigger companies, which causes pressure for the projects. Usually the client needs a part for a bigger machine, which has a deadline for the end client. Company C gets projects with tight schedules and sometimes with a short notice, and the negotiations of delaying the project in a big workload can be difficult. Many of the employees, both in the production and supporting it, mention that there is a lot of work, sometimes too much.

There has been a recent change in the top management of the company and restructuring of the production. Two companies that have worked under the same roof have been put together and a new CEO has started half a year before the interviews were conducted.

According to the interviewees, the company is somewhat divided into two – the downstairs and upstairs - gangs. The division is also physical – the production hall is in the ground floor of the factory, and the administrative work is done in the second floor. The individuals see the situation very differently. The majority of the interviewed production employees see that there is a clear difference between the two groups, but do not mind it. Many of the top managers would prefer a situation where there would not be a division like this.

“[...] I try to visit the coffee hour there and talk to different people so that it would be easy with everyone, so that they would see that we as a company put an effort to them and want them to have things okay.” (top management)

Some production workers, the ones with shop steward or work safety responsibilities do not see that the two groups would have much of a difference in the end.

“[The CEO] makes a round down here and talks, we chit chat together there” (blue-collar employee)

The “regular” workers, middle managers and some top managers feel that there is a difference between the two groups, but “so what”.

Some of the top managers are concerned about the recent organization change of merging the two companies into one and how building of the new, shared identity of the one company has proceeded. The blue-collar employees interviewed saw it from a very straight-forward point of view that it was only a change in the paper. In their eyes everyone did jobs already together before the merge.

“It hasn’t shown in any way [that the two companies merged]. We were practically the same company already before it, did the projects across already.” (blue-collar employee)

When asked about the role and possibilities employees have in decision-making of the company, the top managers shared their thoughts how they saw the blue-collar employees could influence.

“There are the production’s weekly meetings where you can raise development needs to the table, then we have the reward system committee where there are also [blue-collar employee] representatives that have an effect. [...]” (top management)

No-one saw the term “employees” consisting of also the white-collar employees and middle management. The middle management employee interviewed had noticed been left out occasionally.

“It’s something I’ve noticed under the years that middle management is usually the biggest loser, perhaps in decision-making, but especially in

information flow. And it's not just our company's problem, I see it broader than this. I've talked with other people about this and heard about similar challenges. Decisions are made higher; the middle management might not be informed. And they are the ones who the decisions have an effect to. Than you might hear it from somewhere else. That this has been agreed on, "oh, when was that?" (middle manager)

"When you are in the middle management position, for example here the management team makes decisions, and I seldom get information about them. Many times, they [the decisions] touch production and I feel I should know about them. Many times, I hear the information from the production workers, they have heard it, but I haven't. It usually it is so that middle management is [...] between rock and a hard place. You do not get any information from above, you hear stuff from your subordinates and feel a bit stupid when it's something you should have known. I think that's a bit weird." (middle manager)

Also related to the possibilities to influence, some of the top managers see that not everybody takes advantage on the possibilities given to influence. New people have more ideas how to develop the company, but they lose the cutting edge after a while. The interviewees saw that this covers all employee groups.

"[The amount of initiatives] depends on the fact that when new employees come, there are a lot of initiatives, but then people go a bit numb." (top manager)

Many of the interviewees mention that there has been a culture of not making decisions on issues, lack of courage to go to one way or another. This habit is slowly changing.

"Things do not just disappear somewhere [as they used to], they are taken somewhere. That's also a decision that we do not decide on something now, but instead see what the situation is in the fall. Things are clearer and get finished. [...] "start less execute more" – in that direction we are going all the time." (top manager)

The new CEO has started to change the decision-making culture in the management team, but the slowly changing culture isn't yet visible in all of the answers of the blue-collars or white-collars who do not work with the CEO on a daily basis.

“It [the decision-making culture] has changed a bit. But also, because me and [the operations manager] have taken a line where we push [the others] to make decisions.” (white-collar employee)

4.3.2 Participation in decision-making

“People are shy and do not bother, they think that what if you screw up in some way. They do not want to say anything there in front of everyone. But right after we leave the room, animated mutter begins – that is how it is in many places. When they [the managers] say something here, everyone stays silent, and when we go there [back to the hall] they began talking like “how can they say like that?!”.”(blue-collar employee)

Many of the interviewees bring up, that it is very rare to have people commenting on general topics or questions in the common meetings. Many of the production workers interviewed see it as a bad thing, but some feel that there is nothing you could do about it that “people are shy”. The employees working in superior positions in production interviewed acknowledge the situation, that it is typical that no-one but the superiors talk in the meetings. They do not know why it is so.

“Those [weekly meetings] usually tend to be my and [operations manager's] dialogue [to the blue-collar employees]. We do not get that many opinions [from the blue-collars]. But luckily sometimes we get something, sometimes even good points.” (middle manager)

“I do not know why it is so. I think it's a pity. The most important thing is that we go through the jobs, our order log. But it should be more interactive. Usually we go through the jobs and then we try to create some conversation, like “how is everyone, are there any questions?”, like that. It could be that no-one has thirst for knowledge that it's enough for them. But I know that there is grumbling about lack of information in the production. You always try to give a possibility that's the moment right there. I do not know if it's the

fact that we all sit there in a circle almost, people do not there want to... ”
(middle manager)

“Of course, when it’s just the two of us [the middle manager and the blue-collar employee] in the hall there are questions. But those usually relate to the situation at hand, not to anything more general. There are a few people who might ask something [in the weekly meetings] but the majority has probably never opened their mouth.” (middle manager)

Yet, some top managers have ideas on how the employees could be involved more in decision-making. Different technologies are mentioned in addition to using the current information channels better.

“Now that there is the social media and all the apps, we could actually quite easily get people’s opinion, but we do not use them. [...] And as we are so close to each other and share a coffee hour, we could do many things during it, ask for people’s opinion, even if with a hand-vote. But it would require a bit broader outlook on the issue...” (top manager)

One middle manager sees that the situation in the company is good in terms of communication compared to others, even though there is a lot to develop in terms of communication flow.

“Informing about the decisions, or perhaps it’s the internal flow of information is not working so well. [...] when a decision is made, the information about it should go forward faster. That is a clear development area. (middle manager)

But he acknowledges that the situation is quite good compared to many other similar companies.

I have been at workplaces where these kinds of info meetings aren’t held at all.” (middle manager)

Also, some members of top management see need to increase the level of information shared for everyone in the company. They see that communication would increase the employee’s sense of belongingness in the company.

“I would want that as much information as possible would be shared. Because we do not have anything – some trade secrets and prize issues are a different case – but all others. There should be a channel that would ensure the employees would know what they are planning there. A small thing like we are painting the walls upstairs might interest them. They would feel like they would be truly part of the company when they would know about everything that happens here.” (top manager)

When it comes to making the decisions, according to the majority of interviewees, the management team is seen responsible for making the big decisions, but the production employees feel that their opinion is asked regarding for example big machine investments. The interviewees feel that it's easy to talk to people about different issues and influence decisions that way as you know everyone. Some of the interviewees, however, point out that it can also be problematic, if the decisions are done in the corridors as people are so familiar with each other and work close by.

“[...] This is such a small company that it's easy to just walk to someone and discuss the matter there. But that's what can happen easily is that when you have only a couple of people there, no-one remembers to mention about the things forward. I face that quite often that they forget to tell me about things that I should know. And the bill comes, or I face the situation in some other way. [...] We need to get the information more systematic that we would communicate certain issues in a certain way.” (top manager)

In Company C production employees are encouraged and supported in finding new talents to the company. The factory workers get a reward if a person suggested by them is hired after the trial period. The operations manager – their direct superior – is responsible for making the final decision on whether the person is hired in the end or not, but they base the decision on how the person works with the others, does their job and fits the work place in general.

When it comes to the white-collar workers, the policy is stricter, and all new employees are hired based on the decisions made in the management team. There is a big difference between the people working in the production and in the supporting functions.

Some interviewees had strong opinions on issues that should be done differently in everyday work. One issue is the purchasing of different parts to the projects. The parts are bought from suppliers and the delays in production are caused by missing parts. According to the interviewees the reason is that the managers responsible for getting the parts do not have the time to remind the suppliers about deadlines and are not aware of the situation as a whole. The individuals with a lot of criticism regarding the issue, however, didn't see that the function should be organized in some other way, for them it seems that the managers do not do their job and then they are forced to back them up.

“You need to ask them [the managers] [why the parts are late], they always have some sort of an explanation. It is never their fault, it's someone else's. But I of course go and tell them that is my job. But it's their job to take care of it. Do they order [the parts] too late? I think the biggest problem is that after they order, they do not control the supplier whether the part comes or not [...] they should check the supplier and the deadlines more. [...] We have to make the product and then we have to do the supplier process in the production, I think it is the manager's job to do that [make sure the parts arrive correctly and in time] that is what he is hired for. If he would get fired that would be a different thing, we would get it as a separate task.” (blue-collar employee)

“We unfortunately have had the situation for years that doing new kinds of projects is decided based on who shouts the loudest. We have been and are lacking focus of what we want to do [as a company].” (white-collar employee)

There is also will to give more power to the lower levels in the organization. The interviewed top managers who sit in the management team feel that there are many decisions brought to the management team able, even though those could be decided lower among the people whose work the issues relate to directly. Sometimes the reason for taking decisions “too high” was the reason that a person wanted a second opinion and the management team was the only place to get a support for decisions. Being new to the company was one reason mentioned why there was not courage to make such decisions alone.

“So that you would not get spoken ill, it’s covering your back. Even if you would think one way, you do not want people to feel bad, if someone had an interest regarding the matter that I didn’t know. As we are working in a family company, things do not go so straight forwardly, but there can always be something I do not know about.” (top management)

The reward system is an example of a well working process, where the employees felt heard and the top management felt that this was done “correctly” – still the “employees” who were involved only meant the blue-collar factory workers, the middle management and white collars were left out and didn’t feel part of the process.

“For example, our bonus system, which is under construction, changes to it come as a surprise for me as well in the production weekly meetings. And I can’t comment those things there in any way. My role is just to sit and listen with the factory workers. As a middle manager I feel I should be more involved in some way.” (Middle manager)

“It’s [the operations manager] who pushed the issue, there were some alternative models developed and discussed them with the shop stewards and in the weekly meeting there was discussion on what should be done. Then it was done so that from the weekly meeting they got our stand and here I think in the board or somewhere here upstairs they made the final decision on it. (Blue-collar employee)

4.3.3 Participation in strategy work

The old strategies of the company have been more words on a paper than clearly lead plans to tackle the market. Now a new strategy is in the making and the new CEO is leading the process. Now, but also in the past, the management team participates strongly to the strategy process, but not others according to the interviews. The company in other terms seems to follow a very traditional top-down strategy formulation process.

According to the interviews, the CEO has decided the big lines of the strategy with the owner company and next the management team members are supposed to prepare suggestions what in their area of responsibility should be done within those lines. After that they would work on the issues together in a workshop in order to create “must win

battles” and then present the suggestions for the board. After that the strategy would be brought to the employees for their information and then they could “contribute and comment”. The role of the blue- and white-collar employees and middle management is seen implementing the strategy.

“We are asked a lot about things we would like to change [...] we in the management team, not others.” (top manager)

“I think the role of [blue-collar] employees is in that phase where we think with what kinds of actions we would achieve 10 percent increase to our productivity, the improvements come from the [production hall] floor after all.” (top manager)

The top managers interviewed had difficulties in seeing the purpose for wider participation in strategy work.

“There is no point for us to take 35 people to discuss whether our financial goal is 8, 9 or 10 million.[...] including people to things like that is a bit superficial in my opinion.” (top manager)

In general, the blue-collar employees do not feel that they would have a say in making big decisions in the company based on the interviews. This is not seen problematic. One reason that is mentioned is the ownership structure, the company is family owned and now the new CEO is also owning part of the company. Many of the blue-collar employees see that it is the owner’s task to decide upon the big decision in the company, not their.

*“The one’s whose money is involved get to decide which path we choose”
(blue-collar employee)*

*“Those [decisions] are made in the management team, I’m not part of it”
(middle manager)*

New product development is seen as tool to for the white-collar employees influence the overall direction of the company according to some of the interviewees.

“When it comes to products I can influence [where the company is going] pretty well. And I influence. I dare to throw ideas no matter what the response would be.” (white-collar employee)

Especially the blue-collar employees didn't see a need for more participation.

"I do not know if I think it would be necessarily [to participate]. It's more like so that there are specific people, how I've understood it, to do that. It doesn't matter what we do there in the hall, here are the people who do selling and stuff. And when you do your job well here, I will have work there as well, it's good for everyone." (blue-collar employee)

Also, there are different opinions among white-collar employees and managers whether the employees, meaning the blue-collar employees should have more to say to the company's big decisions.

"[...] There is the problem that they are never in any kind of a contact with the product users. [...] So, I do not think we would get anything out from the hall." (white-collar employee)

"It might be some sort of a fear [why employees aren't involved much] that what if we would ask the employees [...] And they would give us big criticism." (top manager)

The top management saw strategy as the end result of the strategy work, which is then put to action. According to the interviewees, the including people to decision-making processes could result bad decisions.

"We can't decide which products we want to make based on who shouts the loudest." (top manager)

Among the interviewees, inclusion and participation were linked in the eyes of the interviewees to inefficiency, slowness and "the Swedish diskuteering" as the company has in the past had problems with making the decisions and executing them. Only thing that in the past had been done was discussing the issues in multiple forums. Some of the interviewees appreciated if the top management shows determination and "strong decision-making skills".

"[...] Perhaps we have too many decision-makers in the house. Nobody takes this kind of, perhaps the CEO should be more decisive and take more

responsibility over the decisions made. If you are the owner, as when we had [the CEO before the most previous CEO who was the root cause for the indecisiveness] who owned the company alone, he was the one who made all the decisions. Things went forward quickly back then. But if decision-making is weak, we just go on about it and the responsibility falls to the shoulders of many. This kind of a Swedish model where we just discuss on and on.” (top manager)

“It’s that kind of Swedish distuteering every now and then. But we are clearly going to a better direction.” (top manager)

“I’m more asking for capability to make decisions by the board and the management team [than opportunities to influence]. Because you can always influence those. [...] Actually, it’s the dialogue before the decision where the influencing happens. Now we are missing the making of the decision and execution.” (white-collar employee)

4.3.4 Case C in a brief

Company C represents a very traditional, small warehouse, and that can be seen from the findings of this case study. The decision-making culture is strongly rooted in old customs, but the new CEO has the will to put all the planning into practice. However, the role of employees is seen only implementing the big plans and strategies. And that seems to be fine for both parties, the blue-collars and top management.

Yet, there were positive examples on projects where the employees, via representatives, had been involved successfully. One example of the projects was the new reward system that was planned together. As the company is very small, the physical closeness also supported interaction between different organizational ladders. Although, as seen in the cases A and B, the middle management feels left out from information flow and decision-making. In discussions the term ”employee” was understood solely as blue-collar, production staff.

In the company, the culture supported acting as you are expected in your role. The majority saw that everyone had their part to play. Wider participation was seen even as a threat – it could create worse strategies and be superficial.

5 Discussion and analysis

5.1 Participation as a dynamic and multi-faceted phenomenon

This study is able to highlight the fact how complex a phenomenon participation actually is (Mantere & Vaara, 2008; Marchington, Wilkinson, Ackers, & Goodman, 1994). As we can see from the results of the study, the topic rises a lot of different opinions based on what people are used to. As the study pre-assumed, there are big differences between participation in decision-making and in strategy work. It is common to participate in issues close to one's own work, but it seems that in these companies, the employees have very restricted possibilities to participate in strategy processes. The interviewees had also very different opinions on whether they and other employees should participate more.

The fact that the company is hierarchical or stiff doesn't mean employees could not participate at all. Some of the interviewees felt a strong sense of inclusion and decision-making power on issues. Yet, there were many, especially middle managers and white-collar employees, who felt their possibilities to participate in decision-making weren't wide enough.

In all of the case companies all blue-collar employees appreciated the current situation of division of decision-making power. Many of them mentioned that everyone in the organization has their own place in the big picture and their role to play, and that should not be questioned. This seems to be a typical opinion among production employees in companies that hold on to traditional top-down strategy processes (see eg. Mantere & Vaara, 2008).

The findings of this study support the notion that participation is seen and experienced very differently when it comes to issues directly related to work compared to strategy and participation in strategy work. In the following two chapters I will first go through different practices related to decision-making and after that those related to strategy work.

5.2 Practices related to participation in decision-making

As the findings also show, there are different practices in the companies related to participation in decision-making. These practices can be divided into those that impede participation and to those that promote participation. In other words, these practices support the sense of influence in decisions made, or on the contrary, create a sense that the decision is out of one's reach. The key practices related to decision-making that I was able to identify from the cases are represented in the following table:

	Shared practices	Company A	Company B	Company C
Practices impeding participation	Not seeing participation important	Tight decision-making grids – only the ones who are defined participate	The power of individual leaders restricting participation	Poor facilitation skills of the managers
		Undirect communication with a language not familiar to all	The hesitance to make decisions	Unofficial discussions
		The matrix organization	Some decisions are made in closed groups	Everyone has their fixed role in the organization
		Not being familiar with the decision makers		Lack of communication
		Non-existent information channel from the grassroots level to the (top) management		
Practices promoting participation		Good leadership, taking everyone onboard and working together towards a common goal	Tools such as Lean	Physical closeness
			In issues seen important, workshops, discussion forums	Unofficial discussions
		The decision-making grids (compared to a situation where a manager decides on their own)	The usage of representatives	The usage of representatives
			The role of HR	Reward system
		Discussion with colleagues		Weekly meetings as a forum to influence

	regarding decisions related to them
	Giving responsibilities, delegating

Table 9 Practices impeding or promoting participation in decision-making

This table makes visible the practices the case companies have regarding participation in decision-making. In these, the companies have a lot of differences, yet some similar themes emerge from the data as well. For instance, according to the interviews, sometimes poor communication and especially individual managers' lack of seeing the value in participation are present as *practices impeding participation*. In the *practices promoting participation* section we can see many concrete ways employees are given power to influence. However, many of them only touch the blue-collar employees, as we saw in the findings chapter.

Regarding the middle managers, different *decision-making grids* were brought up in interviews as practices that restrict their participation. In Company A almost all of the middle managers saw that the ranges were too tight that they restricted their work freedom and caused a sense of mistrust. The ranges were perceived as a form of control. All in all, as practices are a multi-faceted phenomena, the results could have been very different with a different group of interviewees.

5.3 Practices related to participation in strategy work

In these case companies, the practices related to strategy work were in general more discursive by their nature. In the table to follow, the practices related to strategy work are divided into two as in the previous chapter: impeding and promoting participation. In addition to that, the discursive practices are allocated into three subsections each. The subsections are based on the six discourses impeding and promoting participation by Mantere & Vaara (2008).

		Company A	Company B	Company C
Practices impeding	Mystification	The top management "preaches" the	It is top management's	The top managers have the natural

		strategy around the organization	"natural responsibility"	role in defining the key strategies.
		Only top management and "high potentials" participate in the strategy formulation	The strategy is "preached" to the different parts of the organization	The strategy will be "preached" and others should follow
		The role of the middle management (and employees) is to execute strategy	An outside partner was used, closed workshops If there would have been others participating the façade of a unite top management would have been scattered	Closed workshops Other members of the organization implement the strategy
	Disciplining	Must win -battles	Must-win-battles	Must-win-battles
		Everyone has their role in the organization "cogs in a machine"	The strategy process was educating the top management to "think in a certain way"	This is the order of things
		There are clear hierarchies and command-lines	There is willing to somehow punish or intervene to disobedience	
		"It's not what I'm paid to do"		
	Technologization	Lean-hype	Lean	-
Practices promoting participation	Self-actualization	-	By participation, one would understand their role in the organization better	-

Dialogization	<p>It is seen important that the people whose work the decisions affect should participate in making decisions → doesn't apply to strategy, though</p> <p>Involving others in addition to the top managers would bring new ideas → create a better strategy</p>	<p>Via inclusion, different opinions could be taken into consideration better (e.g. human resources) and the changes would be planned in better way</p>	-
Concretization	-	-	-

Table 10 Practices impeding and promoting participation, based on (Mantere & Vaara, 2008)

As we can see from the table, the three companies share many practices, but there are also some differences. In Company A, many of the practices impeding participation are mystifying it. Strategy was often seen “preached” by the top management, and only “high potentials” are included in the strategy process. As brought up earlier in the Findings chapter, there are clear hierarchies and command-lines, and everyone has a part to play. This means, that strategy formulation process is the top management’s natural job, the other’s task is to implement it. When it comes to practices promoting participation in strategy work, there are people in the organization that acknowledge the value of involving individuals outside the top management in strategy processes. Also, many of the interviewees mention that it is important to have a say on issues related to one’s own work – however strategy was not seen as such for the majority of employees according to this study.

Company B has multiple similarities with company A: strategy and “preaching it” were often seen as top management’s natural responsibility. According to the interviews conducted, strategy work was in Company B seen by some of the interviewees as a tool to educate the top management to “think in a certain way”, which was not evident in Company A:s results. There were also more discourses promoting participation compared to Company A: by participation, it was seen that an individual could understand their role in the organization better and strategic decisions would be better planned. Practices related to strategy work I was able to identify in case C related only to impeding it. Closed

workshops for the top management and the role of other members of the organization as the implementers of it was seen natural. Again, these practices were identified based on empirical data collected for this study, and they not represent the entire situation in these case companies as whole. With different interviewees, very different results could have been seen.

As we can see from the table 9 there are clearly a lot more practices promoting participation in decision-making compared to such practices related to strategy work in table 10. This is mainly due to the fact that the strategy process is closed and a traditional top-down process, according to the research data, in all of the case companies. In general, as the findings show, having more influence over the issues that relate directly to one's work was seen important in all three organizations. However, many strategic decisions did have a direct impact on the work of middle-managers and some of the white-collar employees. Still, their participation to strategy work or strategic decision-making was not seen as important.

It seems that the characteristics of these companies support certain discourses impeding participation. They are traditional industrial production companies, where the top management has a clear justification for planning the strategy and the role of others is in implementing. As the *strategy as practice* literature points out, participation to strategy creates better strategies and engages people and creates commitment (Balogun et al., 2014; Vaara & Whittington, 2012). Surprisingly, none of these reasonings were present in the discourses around participation in these companies.

5.4 Contribution to research

The roles and identities of different organizational members has been one of the areas of *strategy as practice* research (Golsorkhi et al., 2014). Hence this thesis work is in the continuum of that research approach, with a special focus on *participation*. This study has contributed to the field by giving more insight and knowledge on the roles of employees in strategy work and decision-making. This focus has gotten only little attention (Laine & Vaara, 2015; Mantere & Vaara, 2008) in the academic literature, as most of the research has concentrated on the role of top managers and board of directors (Aspara et al., 2013; Forbes & Milliken, 2008; Sundaramurthy & Lewis, 2003; Thakur, 1998).

The findings of this study support the notion that participation in strategy work is linked to the basic assumptions the organization members have regarding strategy work as a phenomenon (Mantere & Vaara, 2008). Strategy work as a phenomenon was seen from a very traditional point of view, especially by the blue-collar employees. In their eyes, strategy was something the top management was supposed to do – and saw no meaning in further participation.

Studying practices gives one the possibility to advance theoretical understanding while also producing insight that can benefit different members in organizations in practice (Golsorkhi et al., 2014). In this case, analyzing the practices impeding and promoting participation in decision-making and in strategy work creates clarity to the complex phenomena. By understanding that some practices impede, and others promote participation, one has better possibilities to change them to the desired direction.

Even though the focus of this study was in strategy as practice and participation, the findings could be seen supporting the research related to other approaches to participation. According to Grawitch et al. (2009) there are at least four barriers restraining the organization from implementing employee involvement strategies. Those are: organizational structure, traditional top-down-management approach, competitive strategy and company culture.

According to the findings of this study, people would like to participate in decisions that relate to their work. This finding supports multiple research findings that state that people are more likely to be committed to decisions they have participated in making (De Dreu & West, 2001; Jackson, 1983; Stansbury & Irvin, 2004). Also, when everyone is able to participate in decision-making in a team, more creative ideas and innovations are born (De Dreu & West, 2001).

6 Conclusions

In this thesis work, my aim was to study the role employees have in different strategic decision-making situations in Finnish industrial production companies. The rationale for this study came from the notion that there is a rising interest towards more inclusive approaches to management, but a lot of companies are still practicing traditional leadership methods. My research questions in this study were:

RQ1: What is the role of employees in Finnish industrial production companies related to participation in decision-making?

RQ2: What is the role of employees in Finnish industrial production companies related to participation in strategy work?

The companies represented in this multi-case study are very old companies with strong and old-fashioned company cultures. They do not represent the newest edge of decision-making in Finland. However, there are multiple similar companies in Finland, and it is relevant to understand the characteristics of this kind of companies when it comes to the role of employees in decision-making and strategy work.

There are at least three interesting phenomena that emerge from the findings of this multi-case study regarding the role of employees in decision-making and strategy work. First of all, the case A illustrates how in a huge and very hierarchical organization individual leaders can create microcultures of trust and psychological safety. This requires courage and will to let go of the power given to the manager and a shared, clear goal and vision the entire team shares. In these teams, all employees can make decisions related to the shared goal freely and can feel empowered by that. As seen from case C, for instance, in these traditional organizations a manager has also the power of not including employees to decision-making. It has a significant impact whether the manager feels participation and inclusion are important as such, or not.

Secondly, it seems that in these traditional industrial production companies the blue-collar's possibilities to influence and their participation to strategy work was the first thing that came to the middle and top management's minds when they were asked about the employees' role in general. There were two employee groups dismissed – the white-collar and the middle managers, two groups who actually had the most will and interest in

participation. They wanted to participate in preparing decisions to be made, as they would be the ones to execute them. Some white-collar employee groups, especially product managers in Company B, didn't have a craving for participation. A reason for that might be their wide control over their own area of responsibility. Instead, employees also higher in the organization who were working in marketing, communications or human resources management positions felt the most frustrated with the current situation. Also, the middle managers faced a lack of information and were against "top-down policies", especially in Company A where their hands were the most tied. According to this study, there seems to be problems in information flow and communicating the decisions made higher above, but also a lack of possibilities to make decisions regarding issues directly related to one's work. Big organizational changes and other strategic decisions are also issues that affect the work of white-collars and middle management. There is a large number of individuals who would want to contribute to making these decisions as they feel it would not only make their job easier in the future, but also benefit the company as a whole.

Thirdly, according to the findings of this study, Lean-methods can give great possibilities to blue-collar employees to contribute to and influence their everyday working environment. Also, the shop stewards and other representatives can at best give a sense of participation to the production staff in general. However, the production blue-collar employees do not see a need for any further participation in decision-making, not to mention strategy. There is a strong sense of fixed roles in an organization – that it is someone else's job to decide upon the strategy. This was especially evident in case C where the CEO was also one of the owners of the company. The employees saw the situation in a way that whose money is involved should get to decide where the company would go.

Employee involvement and participation in strategy work strengthens the attachment to the company and commitment (Demangeot & Broderick, 2010; Hutter et al., 2017). In the core of this all is the role of leadership. In other words, are all members of the organization seen as equal, important individuals who have a right to participate in forming the big direction of the company or even the matters that influence their work? Even if changing how an organization works isn't easy, it is inevitable. Companies need to be more democratic in order to meet the changes in the competitive landscape (Cunha et al., 2011). However, this study shows that the role of employees is very multifaceted and complex in traditional Finnish companies when it comes to participation.

Overall, this study gives insightful knowledge on practices industrial production companies have that impede or promote participation. These practices make participation – or lack of it – more concrete and help managers understand why the situation is what it is. Practices that support participation are the aid to strategy implementation problems and lack of employee empowerment (Goldstein, 1981; Hutter et al., 2017). In other words, involving employees to different decision-making processes would benefit the entire company (Thakur, 1998).

If these companies want to succeed in strategy implementation, they need to create new practices to support participation and diminish practices that impede participation. In a hierarchical organization the managers have the power to change their organizations for the future.

6.1 Research summary

In this master's thesis I have studied the roles employees have in companies' strategic decision-making processes and strategy work. The research is done in the context of *strategy as practice*, a strategic management research area, which is interested in the micro-level activities and different individuals doing, planning and thinking of strategy. In my empirical part I inductively analyzed three different-sized Finnish industrial production companies' strategic decision-making cultures and the role different employee groups have in them.

I was able to discover that the three companies had many similarities when it came to strategy work and the approach to it. The strategy was seen in a traditional manner as something that the top management does and the others obey, yet the white-collar employees and middle managers were asking for wider possibilities to influence. Interesting characteristics I was able to pinpoint from the cases were at least three: the impact individual leaders can have in creating trust and agility in otherwise hierarchical surroundings. Also, the role employees had in decision-making and strategy work was given more insights about. Lastly, different practices related to participation were also analyzed. This research has contributed to the academic research area of strategy as practice by giving more insight on the role of employees in strategy making, a topic that has been only little studied before.

6.2 Managerial implications

Companies need to involve employees, from all employee groups to strategic decision-making processes and strategy work in general. It is important to understand that the decisions directly affect a large variety of individuals and that people are more committed to the decisions when they have participated in them.

In traditional organizations, the managers hold a lot of power. They should understand that it is the leader who always carries the responsibility of involving people to decision-making. Trust creates cooperation and freedom creates trust. As we have seen in this case, the overall atmosphere or level of hierarchy doesn't restrict the creation of more collaborative teams inside the company.

The study shows that the blue-collar employees were least interested in participating in strategy work or strategic decision-making. They also linked ownership to the right to decide upon these issues. One way to involve also the blue-collars to be interested in the company's big directions and participating in decision-making would be to change the owning structure of the company to support employee ownership. This would also force the top management to communicate big issues directly to the employees and rethink the entire openness of issues.

Traditionally strategy has been a hierarchical process, but it can also be a distributed process, where many individuals participate in different ways. However, changing the view to strategizing from hierarchical to an alternative one can be difficult (Cunha et al., 2011). This should be taken into consideration if an organization is willing to change the way employees participate in strategy or in decision-making on a broad level. According to Cunha et al. (2011), a communal, non-hierarchical approach to management can be easier in smaller groups compared to big entities. Also, the change might release unexpected developments, both positive and negative. For example, the system might become more confusing and disorganized. The new way of doing things needs infrastructure for a new kind of accountability and the traditional role of the leaders is also challenged. (Cunha et al., 2011)

6.3 Suggestions for further research

This research showed what kinds of roles employees in Finnish industrial production companies can have in decision-making. However, as already discussed in chapter 3.5, in order to make further theories, the findings of the study need testing. To that need, a quantitative study could be conducted, where employees from several companies from the field of industrial production could contribute. The aim of the study would be to get theoretical repetition for the topics discovered in this study.

A topic that emerged from the findings, but this multi-case study was not able to answer, was how education builds expectations about the role of an employee as a decision-maker in the organization. As was seen from this research, different employee groups with different educational backgrounds saw their role in the organization in a different way. Studying how the school builds norms of the roles in the work place could give answers about the reasoning behind this division of opinions. Another topic that emerged from the research data was employee representation in company governance systems. Is using representatives it a tool to include employees and get them more committed to the decisions made, a way to get more understanding on the effects that decisions would have in the lower levels of the organization, both, or something else?

Looking at the subject of participation from a broader point of view, however, the focus of future research could be about how traditional companies have succeeded in changing the way employees participate in decision-making. Another question is, how new ways to organize and share responsibilities and power can work in the field of industrial production. Finding interesting companies that have done something in a very different way compared to others would give valuable insight and break some stereotypes often attached to industrial production companies, especially here in Finland.

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Appendices

The basic structure of the semi-structured theme interviews (in Finnish)

Kerro työstäsi, mitä työnkuvaasi kuuluu? Millaista on? Mitä haasteita on? Mikä on kiinnostavaa?

Millainen yritys XXX mielestäsi on? Millaista täällä on työskennellä?

Minkälaiset päätökset ovat tyypillisiä omassa työssäsi? Mistä kaikesta voit päättää? Kerro esimerkkejä.

Kerro jostakin päätöksestä, jossa et ole itse tehnyt päätöstä, mutta olet osallistunut päätöksen tekoon? Entä toteutukseen?

Minkälaisista asioista koet, että et voi päättää? Mihin toivoisi että olisi enemmän vaikutusvaltaa?

Miten teillä tehdään päätöksiä? Mitä mieltä olet tavasta, joilla teillä päätöksiä tehdään? Mitä ongelmia/haasteita nykytilaan liittyy? Miten sitä tulisi kehittää, jos tulisi?

Miten voit vaikuttaa [yrityksen] toimintaan? Entä suuriin linjoihin, esim. strategiaan?

Miten teillä henkilöstö osallistuu päätösten tekoon, onko prosessi? Miten se toimii? Mikä on roolisi esim. paikallisessa sopimisessa?